

Thyatira

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[0 : 00] So as I said tonight we're looking at this church, the church in Thyatira. And that's at the end of the final section of Revelation chapter 2.

If you like this sermon in a sentence, then this is about Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd, who is calling a part of his wayward flock back to himself to be faithful.

So this is a feature of many of the letters. I remember three weeks ago I think it was, I was speaking, I was looking at the first of the churches in Ephesus. Now the letters follow a similar pattern in many ways.

They speak about things in the church that are commendable, things that are offline, out of kilter, things that need to be fixed or challenged. And there will often be promises that come at the end of the letter for those who are faithful and who hold to what Jesus, the ultimately the writer of the letter wants the people to hold to.

Now again, when I was looking at that church in Ephesus, in some ways what you could say is that the church in Ephesus and the church in Thyatira kind of have kind of roles reversed.

[1 : 17] The church in Thyatira is in some ways the inverse of the church in Ephesus for a few reasons. So in Ephesus the church is in a city that is very prominent.

So it's an important place politically, culturally, very significant. Thyatira, not so much. Not a particularly significant place in and of itself.

But more than that, if you remember the church in Ephesus had to be commended because they had a real focus on keeping, if you like, their doctrine correct.

So they held fast to the truth. But the thing that they had to be corrected on was the love that was lacking. So they had it all sorted and all written up properly and correctly and all their teaching was correct.

But they lacked love. So the church in Thyatira is almost the inverse of that. They're commended for being a loving church and out of the love that they have, it describes how their works flow.

[2 : 23] But they're off-kilter in terms of, if you like, their ethics. There's behaviour going on at the root of their community that Jesus wants to speak to and challenge.

So that's the, if you like, the brief summary of the church situation. So let's look at that just a little bit more closely. The sense of being off-kilter in this church.

That's a very important thing for any church to consider. Amongst the fellowship of any group of believers, where are they at? How are they doing in terms of their personal, individual, walk with Christ?

But as a body, what characterises them? And how are they doing in terms of being faithful to Jesus? Not to themselves or their own ideas, their own traditions or anything like that.

How are they doing being faithful to Jesus? So we see the first thing that's written to them, there's 19.

[3 : 30] There's the commendation. Okay, I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance. Now endurance is an aspect of a few of the different churches.

It was of Ephesus that they were enduring, they were keeping going. And there seems to be a particular sense with these guys, that they do have a spirit of love amongst them and that is a feature that is ongoing.

And there to be commended for that. So they are, they're commended. I know your works and your love. But very quickly we move on in verse 20 to a pretty sharp rebuke.

Again, this is a factor of many of the letters. But verse 20, But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess, is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Now we're going to look at unpacking that a little bit more in a minute. But notice this, first of all, I said this again last time I was speaking, that so very often the danger for the church comes from the church, if you like, comes from within.

[4 : 38] So they're not warned of some external factor if you like. But see the way that it describes this person who's named Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants.

So in other words, this is somebody who has a degree of influence within the fellowship in some way. Again, all the specifics aren't spelled out. But this person is amongst them, say seated here in this room, and they have a degree of influence, and the degree of influence that they, that she has, is poisonous.

And it's resulting in behaviour that she's influencing behaviour so that within them there's a kind of a poisoned atmosphere and a poisoned practice that has to be rooted out and got rid of.

So the threat is channeled, as it were, to within their fellowship. So let's just spend a little bit of time on this, because sometimes when we read through Revelation particularly, even within the letters, which maybe some folk would say are a bit more accessible, at face value, we still think, oh, some of the language here is a bit unusual, I'm not exactly sure what's going on.

So, first thing to say is that it refers to her teaching and her seducing them, and it highlights specifically, the practice or the behaviour that it highlights, is the sexual immorality that's going on amongst them.

[6 : 14] So, let's just say a couple of things, first of all, about the city. It's helpful to understand a little bit about the city, Thyatira. I said it wasn't a particularly culturally prominent place, far as I understand it, but it was a city that was very well known for trade.

So it would have had a degree of prosperity about it, and it had a lot of people who were concerned with business. It was a place where many people were doing well, they were business people, and so their concern was the progress of their business, that they would carry on doing well, obviously.

Now, a little bit just to describe that, I read somebody describing some of the different businesses, so if you want to know the kind of things that were hitting the pages of the Financial Times equivalent in those days, and how they were doing, here's a little list, the inscriptions of details about the city.

Though not numerous mentioned the following, wool workers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather workers, tanners, putters, bakers, slave dealers, and bronze smiths.

So quite a range, quite a range of different things that people were engaged with. You may have clocked when we were reading through that list, and also when we were thinking about Thyatira, of somebody from Act 16, that's Lydia, remember the story of Lydia, and she was from Thyatira, and she was a dealer in purple cloth, so a particular type of material.

[7 : 55] So there's an example of somebody who's from this place, and that's her business, that's what she does. She's a dealer in a particular type of fabric. So there would have been lots of tradespeople, lots of tradespeople, presumably who would have been quite mobile as well, and would have been travelling for business.

But the point about this is that these different trades had associated trade guilds, so organisations that existed to promote or to further their own business.

And they would have each met individually and had their own concerns and dealings and business and all the rest of it. But what they also had, it's written about, is that they had their own trade deity.

So you'll maybe often have heard in the ancient world, there'll be lots of different gods associated with lots of different aspects of the natural world, the sun god and the moon god and all kinds of different gods.

It's also possible that there were gods associated with each of these different businesses. Now of course the reason for that is because they saw the prosperity of their business. And in order to seek prosperity, it was probably thought to appease the god was to pursue prosperity in terms of their business.

[9 : 13] Now associated with that practice would have been various meetings and rituals. And these rituals, it is said, would often have involved things like sexual immorality, all kinds of different practices.

So understanding a little bit about the city helps us see maybe something of the day-to-day work life, potential work life pressures that these Christians faced.

So just think that's the culture that they lived and worked in. Try and think about this as real people lived in time in history. These were some of the potential pressures that they faced in their work community.

And to bring that together with this reference to this woman, let's just consider her for a minute, Jezebel. Now Jezebel may not have been her real name.

Sometimes in Revelation, different parts of the Bible, names are used symbolically to signify something particular. So it could be that Jezebel is used to refer to somebody who is kind of corrupt and who is a corruptor.

[10 : 24] Jezebel, if you were to go back into the Old Testament and look at some of the lists and the details of all the ancient kings, Jezebel was somebody who came in and married one of the Israelite kings.

And their marriage was awful in terms of the prosperity and the spiritual blessing of Israel as a nation. It was a disaster.

They worshipped together pagan gods. So she was somebody who would have been seen in terms of the way that God's people and their writings and in their history and the way that they saw her, she would have been seen as somebody who was, who detracted from the truth, a bad person.

So the symbolism, if it's symbolism, of using that name at this point is to signify somebody who's of bad repute and who is bad for God's people.

Now she may have been a specific prophetess, she may have been a specific teacher, she may have been somebody who was teaching amongst the fellowship of Christians. Do you know, when you go to your trade guilds, it's actually okay to do what everybody else does.

[11 : 36] You know, you're a bit worried about eating the food that they have that have been sacrificed to these deities. It's okay to do that. It won't compromise you. There's a reference later in the passage to the secret things of Satan.

Some commentators think that that's a kind of mystical religion, again, that takes away, distracts from Jesus. But others will say that she's maybe saying, well, you know, you can be solid in your faith, you can stay true to who you are as a Christian, but you can also do what everybody else does, as long as you kind of, in your heart, stay faithful.

So you can go and eat the food sacrificed to these idols, you can go and engage in sexual behavior with whoever it happens to be. And you're okay, you're still okay, you're doing fine.

So when we put together the picture of the city and the trade and all the rest of it, with this reference to this woman and the potential teaching that she was infiltrating into who they are.

So then we start to get a picture of how damaging her teaching is, how corrupting it is. And here's the thing, how different it is to what Jesus would have taught them.

[12 : 44] How unfaithful she was leading them in an unfaithful way, away from the teaching of Jesus, and away from what God would have wanted them to do.

So they face ethical challenges, you could say. And it's maybe the case that some of them, and it is the case that some of them in the fellowship are already ethically compromised.

So what that means is that this letter is written to a people who as it's read to them, or maybe already, or maybe start to feel guilty.

They start to say, you know what, that's me. I know fine well what they're talking about in this letter. And so this is the words that Jesus, remember these letters are all from Jesus to his church.

These are the specific words that Jesus wants to bring to his people, highlighting a specific sin that they would have known fine well was going on amongst them. And it was a specific pressure that they had.

[13 : 50] It's a specific pressure that we would do well to consider for ourselves. I don't think that we will ever have been a time in the history of the church when God's people were free from the temptation to compromise their ethics, their behaviour, how they live their lives.

And you and I are no different. We're absolutely no different. Every day you have the potential to compromise in your faith. In many ways, if we are to think about who we are and where we live, there's a lot of similarities.

We live in Edinburgh, most of us do, I imagine, unless you're visiting, trade, business, finance, capital. And I don't want to suggest that we all face a kind of obvious debauchery in our workplaces, as seems to have been the case here.

But we know in which ways we can be tempted to compromise, to go along with the speech or the inferences or the practice or behaviour, whatever it is in your circle, in your social circle or in your work circle, to progress business.

Now, it may be that you're involved in finance or something very immediately applicable, but it may be also, you know, even if we don't seek to compromise our ethical standards or whatever for work, often the temptation for us is to compromise for ourselves, just so that we're not the only one who looks different, just so that people still think well of us, just so that we still feel part of the gang, or just because we actually want to compromise, because sometimes in our hearts what we want to do is sin, and we don't really want to hear what God's word has to say to us.

[15 : 46] So all of these challenges that come to this ancient church, and which cut right to the heart of who they were as a fellowship, they come to us also, and we do well to ask a question how it applies to us.

We have to ask that question personally of ourselves first. So that's something about the situation and the commendation that is brought to them, that they are loving, but that they have this, not all of them, but there's highlighted amongst them a group who listen to this specific teaching from this particular person.

I think it's always the case that every church can be at different points along a particular line, an axis if you like, between, and this is described in various different Christian writers, legalism on the one hand and relativism on the other.

So on the one hand you slide back towards being judgmental, because what you're really doing is you're regarding your own works' righteousness, your own personal morality which you become very satisfied with, thinking that you're very good at being a Christian and doing all this religious stuff, and you start to judge others and you start to harshly condemn others and all the rest of it.

And a kind of relativism, technical term could be an antinomianism, a relaxing of the law. Things don't matter so much because we're saved, we're in Jesus, and he just, he forgives it all.

[17 : 12] So it's okay to just relax a little bit. So we do well to consider where we are personally on that line. And of course the Gospel is at neither extreme, the Gospel is recognizing the fact that we are sinful in every part of our life.

Sin affects every aspect of who we are, it has the potential to do so much damage in so many areas of who we are, but in the Gospel, in Jesus, because of his grace and his righteousness, we are cleansed, freed, and as a result of that freeing, we live for him with joy and freedom and gladness, knowing the grace of God, seeking to live grace-filled lives and to bless others and be gracious to them as a result.

So we don't say, well it doesn't matter how we live, and we don't say, I'm doing so well and I'm the reason I'm being saved. So there's a little bit about an off kilter church and the words that needed to be spoken to them.

I just want to say a little bit as we look at the second half of this letter. The second thing I'm going to say is how to deal with this, how does the letter help and how does the words that come remember from Jesus help this people deal with this situation.

I think what we really need to do when we're considering, and you yourself may be sitting tonight, very aware of some ethical moral issue in your own heart, some obvious area where you know and you feel the sense of guilt, struggle, you hate it but you struggle with it. How do we get help in that?

[19 : 08] Well, remember what it says right at the start of this letter. Verse 18, to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, the words of the Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

Remember what I was saying a few weeks ago, it's so important to remember that these letters are written from the shepherd, the good shepherd to his sheep. They're not just from John to the people. Christ speaks through John to his people.

So that means that Christ in an ongoing way knows his church. He knows the way they're getting on well and he knows the way that they're in a mess.

And he knows because he cares exactly what to say to them in that situation. And by the spirit, we can be blessed by these letters also even a couple of thousand years later.

But that expression there, eyes like a flame of fire reminds us that Christ sees his church. Now I think a lot of people nowadays kind of hate that idea because what that sounds like is, oh, this is such traditional, typical, mean Christianity religion.

[20 : 27] Jesus is watching you kind of stuff. We think, well, I don't want to live my life like that because a virtue in our culture is individual personal freedom.

And this talk about somebody who has eyes like a flame of fire watching me, I reject that. I don't want to speak about somebody watching me because it compromises me and what I want to do.

But here's the thing. If you were to take an example, if you were to think about having to navigate some say treacherous stretch of water, who would you want as your guide? What kind of person would you want to help you to be with you to navigate that treacherous stretch of water?

Well, you don't know the rules of the water. You don't know what's going to happen next, but you know it's dangerous. I would want somebody who was an expert and who was wise.

So it would be really stupid of me to say, I actually be fine by myself. Thanks very much. I'll just settle for my wee dingy and I'll be fine because I wouldn't be fine.

[21 : 41] That would be a really stupid decision for me to make. I need somebody who is an expert, who knows exactly what he's doing and who is wise.

And when we think about the way that we navigate our life, when you think about the way that you will navigate this week, the work pressure that you face, the pressure and the struggle that you maybe face to live as a Christian, the ethical sense of total confusion that can at times reign in our society, how are you going to navigate that?

I think what we need to do is say, I want to navigate this week through the eyes of Jesus, the one who sees all with these eyes like a flame of fire, which of course signifies to us his perfection in seeing all, but also his purity. Jesus the expert, the one who made us and who knows us perfectly, knows exactly what we need and what is best for us.

I want to see through this week with his eyes guiding me through my life. A few things just to say about that. Of course, when we remember how it is that God views us as people in the way that we behave, we need to remember, don't we, that phrase, I think it's in Habakkuk, God is of pure eyes than to view iniquity.

He's a holy God. Now what that does immediately is it stops us saying, this end of the spectrum, things don't matter so much. I'll kind of just please myself and God won't mind, really.

[23 : 31] He is of pure eyes than to behold sin or iniquity. So that's the first thing. Second thing is to say that it helps us see that sin is bad for us.

You know it's a lie. The lie about sin isn't just, it's not just the action, it's the fact that we can sometimes think that something that is sinful, something that is a temptation, particularly something like sexual temptation, different issues surrounding that.

The temptation is, this is good for me. I will like it and it will do me no harm. And that's a lie. And when we get into that headspace, when we start to tolerate that way of thinking, it perpetuates itself and it can wreck us.

Because it takes us miles away from Jesus. It stops us seeing His holiness and it stops us seeing that the way He views sin is an abomination, something that corrupts us.

Something that means that by ourselves we are separate from Him. So we can't be near Him when we are just in our sin, which is of course why we treasure the Gospel which reconciles us to Him.

[24 : 50] But I think sometimes we need to be reminded and we need to have that truth again by the Spirit of God working in us. Even when we sometimes say, yeah, yeah, I know all that, I know that, I know that.

But we need to be reminded of it again and again. That sin is really bad for us. Wrecks our spiritual lives. And the third thing, the third thing when we view the ethical challenges, however you want to phrase it, through the eyes of Christ and see our lives the way He wants us to see them, is that sometimes what that means is we accept rebuke.

These recipients of this letter, what do they do when they get this letter? They say, oh, thanks very much. I'll just put it over there. Or, no, we think you're wrong, Jesus.

That rebuke is something that they have to take. And here's the thing, because the rebuke of Jesus is the rebuke of the good shepherd.

That's the thing sometimes, isn't it? Sin can even blind us to the point where we think, well, I wish Jesus would stop telling me what to do with my life. Almost what does He know anyway?

[26 : 07] Let me read just a few verses in Hebrews chapter 12. The Bible often actually describes the way that God cares for His people and will rebuke them and even discipline them in love.

Hebrews chapter 12 verse 4 says this, In your struggle against sin, you've not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

My son do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves and justizes every son whom He receives.

It's restorative. Remember what I said at the start? This is the good shepherd calling to a part of his flock who were wayward to restore them. You know, to call them back to himself.

They were dangerously off the path and the teaching that they were receiving that they thought was harmless that sounded like good teaching to them. Kind of let them indulge what they really wanted to be doing in their lives.

[27 : 15] It was taking them off a cliff. The good shepherd would put them back on the safe path. But he has to speak sharply to them first of all. And so that's good.

His words are good to his people. So the first way that we deal with the temptations that we face and sometimes the mess that we can find ourselves in is to see things, if you like, through the eyes of this one who has eyes like blazing fire.

The one who is pure. The perspective of Jesus. The second thing is to see a couple of anomalies. Things that if you like are nonsensical. They don't make sense. Two things.

Verse 23, chapter 2 verse 23. And this is that Christ is the judge of sin. And in fact, the whole gospel that we believe in is the fact that because of sin, Christ was put on a tree and killed for our sake.

Look what it says in verse 23. Verse 22, sorry. Behold, I will throw her onto a sick bed and those who commit adultery with her, I will throw into great tribulation unless they repent of her works.

[28 : 23] Christ really cares about the sin that is at the heart of what she's teaching and what she is leading people into. He will judge it. He will deal with it.

He dealt with it on the cross and there will be a day where he will finally judge all that is sinful and all that offends him.

So what then do Christians have to do with sin? How is it then that we can find ourselves tolerating sin in our lives?

When we're brought to see that again, it's a good thing. It brings us to our knees sometimes. It makes us think, how could I ever have been so stupid as to tolerate this or that or whatever in my life, but we need that.

We need to be brought to that place. We're reminded that Christ, because of sin, went to the cross.

[29 : 23] Because he loved us. The first anomaly and the second one is this. When you look at what he says at the end of this letter and actually what he says at the end of all of the letters, the promises that he then gives to the ones who remain faithful.

Because he always concludes the letter by saying, to those who are faithful, who hear the words that I'm speaking and who recognize the truth that is in them and who persevere, who keep going, who keep faithful to me, despite the difficulty, whether it's an obvious external difficulty, whether it's the threat of a, or the challenge of ethical compromise that we're looking at here.

The blessing that comes, that will come to every believer, who are victorious in Christ ultimately.

We get so distracted, sometimes so confused or blinded because of the amount of things that tell us Christian life is very hard, but sometimes it's just not really worth it.

It doesn't help us get ahead in life, it doesn't make us popular amongst people, compromises our social status or standing, all kinds of different challenges that lower our view of what it means to be a Christian and dampen or even kind of extinguish the view that we need to have of the promises that are there for those that are in Christ.

[30 : 53] Verse 26, the one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them.

You know, Christ is victorious and one day he will be revealed as the King and everyone will see, every eye will see and every knee will bow.

And those who are his children, who remain faithful, will be associated with him. They will be co-heirs with him, raised with him to new life, to rule over a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

And so isn't it crazy that we would see temporal, small-time pleasures, whatever they may be, in this life as more worthy of our attention than what we are called to fix our eyes on as the ultimate promise that we have.

This goal that we have, that one day we will be raised again and with Christ we will rule over a new heavens and a new earth. When we see that clearly, then again, what are we doing with so many of the things that can distract us and kill our sense of spiritual joy and kill our prayer time and drag us down in guilt so all we can see is our sin and we even stop looking to Christ, the one who is our Redeemer.

[32 : 25] We will reign with Christ, is the promise that we are given and the second promise, just in closing. This may be slightly unusual phrase, verse 28, but I will give him, the one who perseveres, I will give him the morning star.

Now that is a reference to Jesus. So what that means, and we are reminded again, is that the promise for you and for me, when we remain faithful, is that we will be raised again as co-heirs to reign with him.

And more than that, we will get him himself. Jesus will be the one who is our companion forever. He is the one who we will be with, the morning star, this great beautiful good shepherd, the one who knows us thoroughly, who knows every danger and who wants to help us and guide us, navigate, all that will pull us down, all that will get in the way, all that will blind us, every spiritual danger that we face.

And so, the call to this church, and to you and me, is to remain faithful. When you feel tempted to think, this is just so ordinary, this is just so everyday, I'm so used to this, I've heard this a million times, fictionalise on Jesus and ask to be shown again his beauty, his goodness, his purity, his clarity, his call on your life, and his promise for your future.

Amen. Let me pray. Our prayer tonight, Lord, who watches over every aspect of our lives and who knows everything, that is bad for us and who wants good for us, our prayer is that you would call us back to yourself, that you would show us your glory and your beauty and your truth, that you'd forgive us for when we're wayward and that you would make us a Christ-like community of people who fix our eyes on you and who rejoice together with the promises that we have.

[34 : 55] Keep us, Lord, from the things that can damage us, the things that bring your name into dispute, and keep us from having a low view of the Christian life, low expectations of what it means to go through life bearing your name.

We pray this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.