

A Letter to Thyatira: The Bride

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[0 : 00] Lord, we long to hear your voice.

Holy Spirit, speak to us. Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight.

Amen. All right. Now, by the way, I'm Dan Bielman. I'm an assistant pastor here at Church of the Advent.

Tommy Henson is on vacation this weekend. He's our senior pastor. He'll be back with us next week. And we're in the season of Lent. We're on week four of Lent. We're working through Jesus's letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

That would be modern day Turkey. Today, we're looking at Jesus's open letter to the church in Thyatira. Because it's an open letter, it's for us too.

[1 : 09] We can read it and read it for ourselves and apply it to ourselves. And because it's to a church, a lot of what Jesus has to say applies to Christians. And I know that doesn't describe everybody here this morning.

So if you're a skeptic, some of what we're going to say might not make sense to you, or you might even object to it. And I ask for your patience. This passage has something to say for all of us.

And we'll get to that shortly. Now, of all the seven churches that we find in Revelation chapter 2 and 3, we know the least about Thyatira. One thing we know is from Acts 16.

Paul and Silas are in Philippi, and they meet a woman from Thyatira named Lydia. We read she's a seller of purple goods. Well, that would fit well with what else we know about the city.

Thyatira was a cultural and political backwater, but it compensated by fashioning itself into an economic and manufacturing center.

[2 : 12] And there were many guilds there. We have inscriptions from Thyatira which tell us of guilds of wool workers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather workers, tanners, potters, bakers, and especially bronze smiths who made armor in particular.

So it's fitting that in verse 18, Jesus presents himself as having feet like burnished bronze. But Jesus is doing more than just playing on a locomotif.

His feet of bronze are a symbol of authority and power. With these feet, he can crush his enemies. And he has eyes like flames of fire that also accompany his kingly authority.

They're the eyes of a judge, with which in verse 23, he searches the mind and heart and gives to each according to their works. This king and judge has authority to commend and condemn.

He commends the church in Thyatira for their good works. For their love, first and foremost. But he holds something against them. It's that they tolerate a person named Jezebel.

[3 : 33] Now, admittedly, that name is kind of distracting because it's a bit of a loaded term for us 2,000 years after Jesus uses it. On one hand, some of you grew up in very conservative parts of the country where the name was used of a woman who was perceived being uppity, ambitious, and with perhaps questionable reputation.

And the name is invoked to attempt to put such a woman in her place. Ah, she's such a Jezebel. On the other end of the spectrum, the name Jezebel has been appropriated by those influenced by literary criticism who look into the Old Testament.

They see a strong and influential woman who has obviously been given a bad rap by male writers trying to preserve the patriarchy. So the name has been given to lingerie lines, indie bands, and World War II missiles.

But why does Jesus invoke the name Jezebel? Remember from Tommy's sermon last week what Jesus is doing in these letters. With each of these letters, he's referring to and recapitulating a specific time in Israel's history.

Here, he's reminding the church in Thyatira of the story of Israel's seduction during the age of the divided kingdom.

[4 : 57] In the 9th century BC, King Ahab of Israel pursued an alliance with the Phoenician city of Sidon and married that king's daughter, Jezebel. Now, Jezebel brought with her false gods, particularly Baal and Astarte, as well as hundreds of priests of Baal.

She was instrumental in the persecution and elimination of Israel's prophets and in the murder of a farmer and the confiscation of his property. Using a metaphor that God uses time and again in the Old Testament, she seduces the Israel to chase after other lovers instead of remaining faithful to Yahweh, her husband.

So how is this playing out in the church of Thyatira? Jesus says in verse 20, She is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Now consider the world of Thyatira with its many trade guilds. These guilds did more than just collect dues and send out membership cards. There was a strong social component to them with common rituals and routines.

To me in D.C. this feels rather foreign, but when my family lived in Vienna, it made a little more sense there, where guilds had more prominence.

[6 : 21] And each year during ball season, many of these guilds had huge elaborate balls at the Imperial Palace. There was the confectioner's ball and the hunter's ball and the doctor's ball and the gardener's ball.

Jen and I, we won free tickets to the Economic Union Ball. We didn't notice any animal sacrifices, at least not on the main dance floor.

But in Thyatira, there would have been rituals and events that would pose difficulty for the Christian. The Scottish theologian William Barclay describes it this way.

The trade guilds had common meals together. The meal would begin and end with a cup of wine poured out as a libation and an offering to the gods. Could a Christian join a ceremony like that?

Still further, such a meal would almost certainly follow a sacrifice. The token part of an animal would be offered on the altar. The meat of it would be given to the worshiper to make a feast for the members of his trade guild.

[7 : 26] Could a Christian sit and eat meat which had been offered to idols? The answer is no, by the way. Could he participate in a meal where the meat had already been offered to Apollo or Artemis?

Still further, this trade guild feast not infrequently degenerated into carousals where drunkenness and immorality were the order of the day. Could a Christian participate in a feast where drunkenness and fornication were the accepted thing?

So, could a Christian participate is the big dilemma here. I mean, it's not really a dilemma. It was understood from the very beginning of the church that Christians couldn't participate in the worship of idols nor could they have sex with slaves as an after-dinner treat.

But to not participate meant the risk of not belonging to the guild. And to not belong to a guild meant economic ruin if you lived in Thyatira.

So, we can assume that some in this church have esteemed from these practices and as a result endured persecution and ostracization.

[8 : 35] But then along comes a teaching that says, no, no, no, there's a way to participate in these events and still be a Christian.

You can participate in an idol feast and follow God. You can have sex with anyone you like and still be committed to Jesus. You can fully belong to this other world and also belong to Christ's church.

When we see that the issue that Thyatira wrestles with is a fundamental issue that every Christian in every era, in every city of the world has faced.

You adjust your behavior and belief to be fully integrated without cost. If you want something bad enough, you will eventually find the intellectual reasoning to justify it.

Or to summarize what Thomas Cranmer taught, what the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. What the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

[9 : 44] And Jesus rightly criticizes this. He writes, you tolerate this kind of teaching. Well, he doesn't write this. I'm summarizing. You tolerate this kind of teaching, these intellectual gymnastics to justify your immorality, you'll believe whatever it takes to avoid the cost of following me.

Now, do you find yourself doing that? Do you find yourself making intellectual justification for pursuing things you know deep down you shouldn't?

Well, as long as it's not hurting anybody, I can click on this or do that. That's fine. Or, man, the church I belonged to growing up was so fundamentalist.

I am just not that. I'm something new, something better. Or, simply, the one word exclamation, grace!

There's grace! I believe in grace! You know, I have a friend who's a pastor, and he had a man come into his office. And the man confessed something that he had done on a recent business trip.

[10 : 53] He and his colleague, who's a woman, had recently closed this great business deal. And they were at the same hotel together. And so they went to the bar, had some drinks, felt very celebratory, and so went upstairs together.

And he confessed this to my friend. And my friend, the pastor says, well, thank you for confessing. You should know that you are forgiven. Now, let's take steps to tell your wife.

And let's start to bring reconciliation between you and her. And let's take steps to prevent anything from happening again like this. And then this guy says, whoa, you know, I am so disappointed in you.

What about grace? What about grace? You expect me to roll this out? You're not showing grace to me. You talk about grace all the time, but you can't show it to me. And of course, he's talking about cheap grace.

Is he not? He's intellectually justifying the excuse to not repent. Yes, God does show grace.

[12 : 02] And therefore, he gives us time to repent. He calls us to repent. He gave Jezebel in verse 21, time to repent, and her followers time to repent in verse 22.

But I think a lot of us would echo Augustine's sarcastic prayer. Lord, make me pure, but not yet. You see, in these verses, a sense of urgency.

God calls us to repent now. Now is the time to repent. The time to repent is today. So what are you doing to repent?

What are you doing to repent? You know, we have triads that are perfectly built for this, a place where you can confess and receive support, a place to become accountable to one another.

We have the right of confession. I don't know if you knew that. It's not just a Catholic thing, but we, the priests will hear confession. If you'd like to use that as the first step in on the road to repentance.

[13 : 08] We confess and we repent because we recognize that sins violate intimacy. They violate intimacy with God and with each other.

There is a horizontal and a vertical dimension to our sin. A dear friend of mine found himself unwilling and unable to make his secrets known.

What began with childhood abuse and trauma led to bad and progressively worse decisions made in adulthood. He's now spending the first of 11 years in jail.

In the lead up to the trial, we talked several times on the phone. And the very first time we talked after having been arrested and released on bond, he spoke of his grief.

He told me he had always wanted to be famous. And he was a musician. He just recorded an album. But now he'll never be known for that. He'll be known for this.

[14 : 17] And his prayer uttered to me through tears was that as famous as his sin was, his sorrow, he prayed that his sorrow and that his grief, repentance would be even more famous.

Would I be famous for the sorrow of my sins and for my repentance? What if the church were known for that? What if we were known for that as a church, famous for our repentance, repenting of not loving our neighbor, repenting of the sins of racism and social injustice?

What if we were known as the people who could freely say, I'm sorry? Now, if you're a skeptic, you might be thinking, there's a lot of talk about sex going on.

Why are Christians so hung up on sex? And the answer is, actually, yes, we are. We are hung up on sex, but it's perhaps for different reasons than you think.

The Christian faith has much to say about sex and marriage, because as Christopher West wrote, sex is not just about sex. The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest held convictions about who we are, who God is, the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and even the ordering of the universe.

[15 : 43] You see, the body and sex and marriage proclaim to the world, God's love for humanity and his plan for us. The Bible begins in Genesis with a marriage.

As husband and wife become one flesh, it ends with a marriage. As the church, the bride, is presented to Christ, her bridegroom. And from beginning to end, we find the theme of marriage.

In the Old Testament, a sinful Israel is often compared to an unfaithful wife. In the Gospels, Jesus chooses a wedding to perform his first miracle. The Apostle Paul commended marriage as a union to be honored by all people.

And right in the middle of the Bible, God tells us what he's up to. In Hosea chapter 2, God says, You see, God doesn't choose marriage, the picture of marriage, because it was a convenient way to demonstrate what he thinks of us.

He made marriage for the express purpose of letting us know that he wants to marry us. God wants to marry you. This is why in verse 28, he says, I will give him the morning star.

[17:07] What is that? What's the morning star? Well, first of all, it's hope, right? The very darkest part of the night, that's when Venus appears, the morning star, signaling an imminent dawn.

But the morning star is also himself. In chapter 22 of Revelation, verse 16, he writes, I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.

He wants to give us himself. He wants intimacy with us. He wants union with us. He wants us to know that we can come to him and tell him, I'm sorry.

And here, every time, you are forgiven. He wants us to be able to rise out of the pigsty and run to the father every time and to know that we're going to receive the robe and the ring.

And for there to be a party, a feast held in our honor. He wants us to be able to look into his eyes and see total acceptance, total delight. He wants union and communion, intimacy with no fear of rejection, full of acceptance.

[18:17] Before we close, let's be honest. This is a little difficult part. I found the language that he uses to describe Jezebel and her, her fate, uh, and the fate of her followers is frightening, but it reveals God's heart for his bride.

He's a jealous husband and he acts swiftly and terribly to guard the purity of his beloved bride.

It recapitulates the faith, the, excuse me, the fate that met the first Jezebel. Jezebel in second Kings was thrown out of a window onto the rocks below.

And before she could be buried, dogs got to her first. And all that was left of her was her skull and her feet and the palms of her hands. That's odd. The palms of her hands. Now let's be honest with ourselves.

We chase after foreign gods all the time. We bow down to all kinds of things that we think will bring us pleasure and life and acceptance.

[19:34] Yet we don't receive Jezebel's fate. Christ receives that fate on our behalf.

He dashed himself upon the rocks of God's judgment so that we would not have to face that punishment. He had his skull pierced by thorns and his feet and his palms pierced by nails on the cross so that we, his bride could be made pure, holy, spotless, blameless bride, presented to Christ to enjoy the most lavish of wedding feasts now and for all eternity.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.