

The Seven Letters (5): The Church in Thyatira

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[0:00] Well, we're going to read now in Revelation and chapter 2 and verse 18. This is the word of God.

I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of their works, and I will strike her children dead.

And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give each of you according to your works.

Even as I myself have received authority from my Father, and I will give him the morning star. He who is an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[2:15] Amen. As a young Christian, older Christians gave me books to read which they thought I'd find helpful.

And I still have them all, but one continues to be a regular read. It's a book called No Compromise, about the life of the Christian singer Keith Green.

No Compromise tells the story of Green's conversion, his growth as a Christian, how he became one of America's most famous singers, and his tragic and untimely death at a young age.

Keith Green truly was a Christian who made it his aim never to compromise his Christian beliefs or standards.

So his legacy is one of unblemished love, grace, and holiness, and unstinting enthusiasm for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He refused to compromise his Christian principles.

[3:23] There was never once a hint of scandal. His was a life wholly given over to Jesus. Now, Thyatira wasn't a big city.

It was more of a town, maybe Dingwall size. But it was famous in Asia Minor for two things. It was famous for its trade in cloth. It produced all kinds of cloth, which were later used to produce robes. So when the apostle Paul arrived in Philippi, he met a Jewish lady called Lydia, of whom we read that she was a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira.

But the second thing about Thyatira was it was famous for its trade guilds. Its trade guilds.

Tradesmen formed guilds in which they assisted each other with business.

And if you weren't a member of a trade guild, you simply didn't get ahead in business in Thyatira.

So I guess, I don't know if this is controversial, but I guess it's probably a mix of a trade union and the Freemasons.

[4:26] The problem was that these trade guilds were closely connected to pagan rituals and ceremonies. To participate in these trade guilds involved eating food sacrificed to pagan idols and actively engaging in religiously motivated fertility rites, which usually meant sexual immorality.

If you did not participate in these pagan rituals, you were thrown out of the trade guild and you could not conduct business in Thyatira.

So you can see the problem for the Christian church in Thyatira. Should you compromise and stay in business? Or should you stand your ground but go broke?

Lose your business and probably then your home. That's the context into which Jesus writes this letter. A church tempted to compromise with the society in which it lives.

Shall it be like Keith Green who refused to compromise? Or shall it loosen its rules and in order to get ahead and survive, blend into society?

[5:41] Now this letter in Revelation chapter 2 verses 18 through 29 addresses, this is why I'm kind of grimacing, three, not two groups in Revelation.

But three is fine. Remember the three? Remember the good, the bad and the ugly? Well, we have the ugly, the bad and the good. And the challenge for us, the application for us is deeply

challenging.

Are there ways in which we as individual Christians and as a church are compromising our Christian faith and principles in order to fit into the society in which we live?

If a book was written about us, could it be called as Keith Green's was, no compromise? So the first group we'll look at are the ugly ones.

The ugly ones. In the church of Thyatira there was a very prominent prophetess whom Jesus calls Jezebel. Her gender is unimportant. Her real name probably wasn't Jezebel.

[6 : 45] But Jezebel was a very important figure in the Old Testament. She was the wife of King Ahab of Israel. She herself was not a Jew but a Gentile.

She was a Canaanite, a worshipper not of the God of Israel but of Baal, the God of Canaan. Her husband Ahab was a gutless man who was easily manipulated.

Under his rule, Israel became a very difficult place for godly prophets like Elijah who Jezebel tried on more than one occasion to murder.

Under her rule, the prophets of God were replaced by the prophets of Baal. Now, Baal worship was disgusting. Baal worshipers worshipped idols made of wood and metal and stone.

Sexual promiscuity was very much part of their religious worship. And Israel, under her rule, became all of these things. If you want to get ahead in Israelite society, you go with the flow.

[7 : 51] You buy yourself some household idols. You go to worship Baal with all the immoral practices such services involved. Now, Jezebel was a disgusting, horrible woman and she died by being eaten by dogs.

This false teacher in Thyatira, whoever it was, was playing the role of Jezebel by seducing her followers into all kinds of evil. What Jesus calls in verse 20, sexual immorality and eating food sacrifice to idols.

And what she was doing was encouraging her followers to fully engage in the trade guilds in Thyatira. Which, of course, involved the meeting, food sacrifice to pagan idols and whatever other immoral things were necessary to be members.

In verse 24, Jesus describes the teaching of this prophetess. He calls it the deep things of Satan.

This person, let's call her Jezebel, was actually part of a group we've already encountered in Jesus' letters and Revelation.

She was a Nicolaitan. She taught that what was of primary importance in the life of the Christian was the spirit. What you did with your body wasn't really very important.

[9 : 15] But when it comes to the life of your spirit, you're free to speculate on all the mysteries of the spiritual realm from the heights of heaven to the depths of hell.

Jezebel wasn't content to follow the elementary teaching of the apostles. She wanted to explore more mysterious, speculative things. Now, I know I'm not explaining this very well.

I don't really want to. It's better not to know what these people thought. The point is, Jezebel taught the wrong things because she wasn't satisfied to stick with the plain teaching of the gospel.

To stay a member of Tartarus Trades Guild and get ahead, you had to get your hands dirty, your body dirty. But that's okay.

Because after all, it's the life of the spirit that's important. Now, there isn't a modern day church of the Nicolaitans you can attend in Glasgow. But the teaching of the Nicolaitans is well and truly alive in today's churches.

[10 : 23] Jezebel's still prophesying. She's still leading Christians astray. Some of them say, well, as long as you're saved by faith in Christ, you can live any way you choose.

We are not under law, they say, but grace. And they say that by conforming to this world's standards, they're not compromising their faith.

They're rather exercising their Christian liberty. They don't want to talk about the ethical teaching of Jesus. They'd rather engage in mystical speculations in a vain attempt to excuse their immoral behavior.

Let's be crystal clear. The spirit of Jezebel, the spirit of the church in Thyatira, was a spirit of compromise with the world. A spirit which pays little or no attention to the ethical teaching of the gospel.

Does this sound contemporary? My freedom and liberty as a Christian means that I can fly as close to the wind as I choose. And if I step over the line from time to time, well, that's just me.

[11:29] It doesn't really matter. And if anyone challenges me in my behavior, I can just justify it by saying, well, it's my Christian liberty. And if I don't do what others are doing, I'll be excluded.

And I won't get ahead in my life and my career. That's how the followers of Jezebel justified themselves. That if they didn't engage in the sordid practices of the trade guilds, they'd be thrown out, they'd lose their businesses.

So let's get to the challenge. Are there any ways in which we are acting like Nicolaitans, like followers of Jezebel? To get ahead in life, relationship, and career, are we compromising on the teaching of the Bible about holiness and purity?

To what extent are we blending into the world rather than being different from the world? And of course, we justify ourselves by saying, well, if I'm different from the world, I won't get ahead in the world.

I'm going to lose friends and career and opportunities. To what extent are we guilty of that level of compromise? And we can cloak this compromise in very respectable garb.

[12:41] Of course, to get ahead in our society doesn't necessitate promiscuity or eating food sacrificed to idols. But are there other ways in which we compromise as Christians with the world?

Our attitude to the Lord's Day is work more important than worship. Our attitude to alcohol is letting go more important than self-control.

Our attitude to money is personal fiscal security more important than gospel generosity. Our attitude to time is personal pleasure more important than Christian service.

Our attitude to career is progression more important than family. Our attitude to reputation is status more important than integrity.

Okay, listen, we could go on. But you can see how easy it is for the spirit of the Nicolaitans to creep into our churches. At the beginning of this letter, Jesus describes himself as the Son of God, whose eyes are like a flame of fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

[14:01] Here we have a picture of absolute purity. Jesus will not tolerate this kind of impurity and unrighteousness being taught in his church.

To him it is unspeakably ugly. In verse 21 we read that he gave Jezebel time to repent, but obviously she was unwilling. As a result, Jesus will make her physically sick.

And he will bring upon her followers, her children, troubles if they will not repent. And if they will not repent, he will purify the church in Thyatira of every trace of her teaching, including those who are unrepentant in following her.

It really is quite a shocking statement. I will strike her children dead. In verse 23. I will strike her children dead. But the death to which Jesus refers here, it may be that of physical death, but more likely the second death.

These followers of Jezebel, for all they may call themselves Christian, shall be condemned to the everlasting condemnation of hell. By way of application on this point, we need to ask ourselves an important question.

[15:18] Is compromise with the world really worth it? Is compromise with the world really worth it? Is it worth risking our eternal souls for the sake of getting ahead in this life?

We may think of these compromises as being respectable, part of our freedom as Christians, but to Jesus they are indescribably ugly. Blending into the world will cost us more than we can ever imagine.

And here's a warning from the heavenly Jesus, whose eyes are like flames of fire and whose feet like burnished bronze. It's a warning. Are we serious enough about Jesus to repent?

Well, those are the ugly ones. Now the bad ones. The bad ones. If the ugly in the church in Thyatira are Jezebel and her followers, the bad in Thyatira are those who tolerate her in the church.

They don't necessarily agree with their teaching, but they do nothing to get rid of her. They tolerate her, and they allow her to keep on spreading her poison. They permit her to associate with them.

[16:33] Outsiders then associate her with the church. Toleration is the evil of which the majority of the church in Thyatira is guilty.

Toleration. Now to some extent or other, we must be tolerant, but only in non-essential things. We must be tolerant of each other's personalities, preferences, problems.

We can be tolerant about differences of opinion over secondary matters, but we must be intolerant of differences over primary gospel issues. In the Free Church of Scotland, our denomination, our subordinate standard is the Westminster Confession of Faith, a document to which we rigidly

require every office bearer to sign.

Of course, in practice, minor differences are allowed. But more basically, evangelical Christians like ourselves are united around the UCCF, Universities and Colleges of Christian Fellowship, Statement of Faith, which covers subjects such as the authority of the Bible, the centrality of the cross, the need for faith, the person of the Holy Spirit, and so on.

One cannot call oneself an evangelical born-again Christian unless one subscribes wholeheartedly to the UCCF Statement of Faith. But this Statement of Faith says nothing about baptism, the Lord's Day, or the charismatic gift.

[17 : 59] So it's inferred that we can be tolerant about these and other less-mentioned issues. Tolerance is important in the church. A church which is intolerant of people unlike itself will never grow and will never be healthy.

But to tolerate Jezebel and her followers in the church in Thyatira was not the same as putting up with people who share different opinions about what to sing, what instruments to use, or even having people in the church who have a different view of Sunday from what we have.

It was putting up with people who deny the very foundations of the gospel. It was permitting them airspace in the pulpit, headspace in people's minds. It was tolerating their blasphemy of Christ and denying the reality of the cross of grace and of faith.

Back in 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul warns the church of tolerating among them those whose beliefs and behaviors were wrong. He wrote, As the Israelites, the Old Testament Israelites, wandered through the desert on their way from Egypt to Canaan, no idolatry at all was tolerated in the camp.

When it comes to our physical health, we do not want to even permit the tiniest cluster of cancer cells in our bodies. We do this because we know that if these cells grow, if idolatry in the Christian church is permitted to grow, if any use is found in the dough, it will rise.

[19 : 47] Tolerating something allows it space and time to spread, rise, and grow. If we tolerate sins of belief and action in our hearts, they will grow.

If we tolerate sins of belief and action in our church, they will grow. In verse 23, Jesus says of the judgment of Jezebel, And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches hearts and minds. And from that we infer that we must be aware that if we in Crow Road tolerate sins of belief and action in our church, these sins will not only grow among us here in Crow Road, but will spread beyond our church to other churches.

Because if we can do it, so can they. If the church down the road is okay about the sexual ethics of its members, why can't we be?

My friend, the Scottish preacher and theologian Ian Hamilton, who will be leading our communion season in November, he's a marvelous, marvelous preacher, a lovely Christian man.

[20 : 57] He wrote a book a number of years ago with the probably not best-selling title, The Erosion of Scottish Calvinist Orthodoxy. It's a wonderful book, but in that book, Hamilton tells the story of how the Scottish Secession Church declined and disappeared from the scene.

The Secession Church started very well. Think of Ebenezer Erskine and Thomas Boston, these guys. It refused to compromise with unorthodox teaching and was zealous for the truth.

But after just a couple of decades, it admitted a man into its ministry who didn't hold to the whole teaching of the confession. His admittance to the ministry of the Secession Church was advocated by several ministers who thought the church was being too narrow and that this guy actually, well, he's a really good guy, but he'd let him in.

So they let him in. Soon after, his unorthodox teaching began to spread. Within a few decades, it had become rife and the Secession Church began to decline.

Now, we can blame that original minister who was admitted into the ministry of the Secession Church for his wrong beliefs. But what Ian Hamilton insists is that it was the fault of the church at large for compromising the truth by admitting him in the first place.

[22 : 23] They compromised with the compromiser and it led to the long, slow death of the Scottish Secession Church.

Now, we may not be compromising, but are we compromising with the compromisers? Or in a loving, gracious, but firm way, are we walking the path of Keith Green who refused to compromise on the teaching and practice of the gospel?

If it is ugly to compromise, it is bad to compromise with compromise. It exposes us to danger we'd be wise to avoid.

Dangers which may result into us giving into the compromises in order to fit into the society in which we live. When I'm up north in Gospy, we go for a walk in the hills and sometimes you'll see a snake in the header or on the path in front of you.

You don't go and put your hand out to touch the thing. You walk away. When we see compromise in the church, we do not go need it.

[23 : 38] We quickly walk away. And as for us as individual Christians, when we see someone who calls himself a Christian sailing too close to the wind when it comes to drink and worldliness and relationships, we warn them.

Then we steer clear. We run away lest we become like them. A hard teaching, but that's what Jesus says. Well, finally, there's the good.

There's the good. You know, there's many things we could say which reflect Jesus' knowledge about the good things of the church in Thyatira. For example, Jesus says, he begins his letter, I know your works, your love, your faith, your service, your patience, and endurance that your latter works exceed the first.

There were good things about the church in Thyatira even though it was in danger of compromise and compromising with the compromisers. To those in the church who in the words of Jesus in verse 24 do not hold to this teaching, those who have refused to compromise with the false teaching of Jezebel, Jesus says, I do not lay upon you any other burden, only hold fast to what you have until I come.

Verse 25, hold fast to what you have until I come. There's the command Jesus is giving to those who refuse to compromise with the false teaching of Jezebel, but in danger of compromising with the compromisers.

[25 : 16] Hold fast what you have until I come. Well, to what should the church in Thyatira hold fast?

Commentators agree it is the basic fundamental teaching of the gospel. This is to what, this is what the church must hold fast to.

What Paul calls in Jude, the faith once delivered to the saints. As human beings, we're curious and sometimes that curiosity can get us into trouble.

Rather than settle for what God has said in His Word, we speculate, we come up with new ideas, new interpretations. In general, here's a little tip for you all. In general, if you hear something from a preacher you have never heard before, you can be fairly certain he's wrong.

Jezebel and her followers were unwilling to stick with the plain teaching of Scripture but allowed Greek philosophy and Jewish mysticism to pollute their thinking and behavior.

[26 : 19] By contrast, we must content ourselves with what God has already revealed to us in His Word. For anyone who bases his or her life on what we already have in the Bible, we find it that it's more than enough to satisfy, enjoy, and fill our minds with the most amazing truth in all history.

God became flesh and dwelt among us. God Himself bore the guilt of our sins upon the cross. God demands no work from us in order to be saved, yet simple faith in Him.

In Christ our hidden, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. His resurrection, His victorious resurrection is our victory over death in the grave.

I've been a Christian now for nearly 40 years. I have barely scratched the surface, I often say this to Kathler, I've barely scratched the surface of even the most basic teaching of the Gospel, let alone figure out how to apply it in my life.

Hold fast to what you have. Invest in the Gospel, invest in your Bible, invest in a living relationship with Christ by the Holy Spirit. Do not be distracted by this or that new thing.

[27 : 43] Stay focused and refuse to compromise in either the Gospel you believe or the grace and holiness by which you live. Those Christians who stayed faithful to Christ and refused to compromise were automatically thrown out of the trade guilds.

They lost their businesses, they lost their wealth, they often lost their homes. They lost their status in society. To them Jesus promised that He would give them a greater status than they could ever have imagined.

those who compromised and retained their status among the trade guilds of Thyatira will have nothing in the world to come.

But those who refuse to compromise Jesus says He will give them authority over all the nations and they'll rule as kings.

They'll be given the morning star. The morning star in the world of the day the planet Venus was a sign of victory and authority for all those faithful Christians who end up with nothing in the world they'll have everything when Jesus comes again.

[29:05] And the question for us as we close resolves down into this. For those who are willing to blend in society those willing to compromise with the standards of this world there is much to be gained here and now.

You will gain much. You will lose nothing even if you should so choose to call yourself a Christian. However in the new heavens and the new earth you will have nothing.

Nothing. For those who like Keith Green who are unwilling to compromise with the standards of the world but stand fast upon the gospel there is little there is nothing to be gained in the here and now and everything to be lost.

It may cost you much to be a Christian however in the new heavens and the new earth you will have everything. Keith Green died as a relatively young man in a plane crash.

His was a life of no compromise. I want to challenge all of us here today based on Green's example in Jesus teaching here in Revelation to make our lives no compromise.

[30:29] We shall be 100% for Jesus and 100% for his gospel. And perhaps you know that's not the way it's been for you. For many years it's not been that way.

Time to make it right. Time right now. Time to make it right to repent and to return when Christ in all the purity of his glory looks at you right now.

What does he see? Let us pray. Lord we recognize that every one of us in our own unique ways ways hidden from others compromise with the world.

But Lord Jesus we want you and you only to be everything to us. We want to be 100% for you and for your glory and reputation in this world.

And if truth be told Lord we've prospered much from blending in and compromising with the world and there's times we've enjoyed it but there's other times we've realized it's empty and meaningless.

[31:45] Lord we ask and pray today that you would do business with our hearts and you would show us those ways in which we have compromised and you'd bring us back to the purity of the gospel and all the beauty of its rationale in all the glory of its love.

In Jesus name. Amen. Amen.