

Persevere in Christ's Work

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[0:00] Well, we've been going through the book of Revelation for six weeks now, so perhaps it's good to stop a bit and review at least the first three of Jesus' letters to the seven churches.

So, if you remember, the first letter goes to the church in Ephesus, whom Jesus praises for their commitment to the truth.

They cannot tolerate false teachings, and that's a good thing. But Jesus demands that they repent because they have forsaken their first love. We will see later that this is directly opposite to the church in Thyatira.

Now, the second letter goes to Smyrna, where Christians suffer persecution, particularly by the Jewish people. And Jesus assures them that he is the sovereign king, and he sympathizes because he too has been persecuted and he has died and now he leaves.

And then the third letter from last week goes to Pergamum, where the Christians suffer from persecution by the local government, to the point that someone from their church, Antipas, has died for his faith.

[1:21] Now, Jesus praises them for their faithfulness to him, but he rebukes them because some people in their midst try to combine temple worship and immorality with Christianity, syncretism.

And then the fourth letter goes to the church in Thyatira, which is our text. But before we read the text, here's a bit of context of what was happening in the city of Thyatira.

So Thyatira was a small trading city. So even though it's small, commerce was quite strong.

However, in order to thrive in the commercial life of that city, people had to participate in trade guilds. So people of the same profession or trade, they gather and they form a guild as a source of networking and also professional control.

Now, this posed a problem for Christians. Because without participation in the guilds, they would lose business and social life. But to participate in the guild, Christians would also be expected to participate in the worship of the patron god of the guild.

[2:47] And different guilds would have different patron gods. And so, while Christians in Pergamum last week faced a threat to their lives, the Christians in Thyatira struggled with economic pressure.

Now, apparently, out of all the industries in Thyatira, the metal working industry was one of the most prominent. And out of all the gods, Apollo, the sun god, was the most prominent.

And this is relevant to our text. Because given this context, verse 18 becomes polemical. So in verse 18, Jesus says, To the angel of the church in Thyatira, write, These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

Jesus introduces himself, first of all, as the Son of God. This is the only place in the whole book where the title Son of God is used. And the context is fitting.

Apollo, the Son God, was also the son of Zeus. The king of the gods. Jesus is saying here that he is the true Son of God, not Apollo, and his father is the true king, not Zeus.

[4 : 23] Second, his eyes are like flaming fire. This is also relevant, because Apollo draws his power from the sun.

But Jesus doesn't need to do that, because his eyes are fiery. And in fact, at the end of the book of Revelation, it says, The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the lamp, that's Jesus, is its lamp.

As if Jesus is saying here, Apollo draws his power from the sun? I'm the sun! And then third, Jesus' feet are like burnished bronze.

Again, metalworking was the most prominent industry, and they usually supplied metal armors and weapons for the Roman soldiers.

But there is also an indication that these metal workers thought they were working metals for Apollo. As we can see on this coin from Thyatira, on the right-hand side there, you can see a picture depicting a tradesman making a metal helmet for Apollo.

[5 : 42] Jesus, Jesus, however, doesn't need people to give him metal armors. He doesn't even need any armor at all, because even his feet are like burnished bronze, strong.

What Jesus is saying here is that he is the better God, more superior than Apollo or even Zeus.

So even the way Jesus introduces himself here is quite comforting for Christians there who were excluded from the society because they did not worship these gods.

But also, it's polemical for the non-Christians who worshipped Apollo, because Jesus claims to be the better God, the better Lord, the better warrior.

We might even say infinitely better. So here we can stop and consider one implication for our engagement with the world.

[6 : 51] Jesus' claim here gives the Christians in Thyatira not only encouragement, that they're worshipping the right God, but also ammunition to counter the narrative of the society with the gospel.

And to counter the gods of the society with Jesus. And so we can do the same. We can counter the narrative of the society with the gospel.

How do we do that? Well, we need to understand the narrative of the society, and we need to understand the gospel. So for example, today we have two opposite forces that exist in the same subculture.

On the one hand, the narrative says, be yourself, reach your own happiness, self-actualization. Don't care about what other people think.

You reach your own destiny. The self-centric narrative. But on the other hand, the same subculture also says, be like us and assimilate.

[8 : 03] Everyone else is accepting the new gender theory. So should you. Everyone else is affirming all beliefs and all lifestyle. So should you. If you don't, we'll exclude you or cancel you.

Now the story of the gospel sort of counters both narratives. On the one hand, the gospel says, don't be yourself, because your self is hidden in Christ, who is lovely and glorious and beautiful and perfect.

While also affirming the value of our self as created in the image of God, redeemed by Christ and transformed by the spirit. On the other hand, the gospel narrative also says, don't assimilate to the culture, be conformed to Jesus instead.

While also affirming the value of using human cultures for the sake of the gospel. Like Paul, who says, I am like a Jew to the, I become like a Jew to the Jews and like a Gentile to the Gentiles.

Just as Jesus counters the pagan narrative with his gospel, so we can try doing the same with the culture around us. When we can converse with our friends, our co-workers, children, or even grandchildren.

[9:37] We need to know their narrative and we need to know the gospel. And then Jesus continues with the good deeds that the Christians in Thyatira did.

In verse 19, I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

And so there are four good deeds here that Jesus commands them for having. Love, which is very likely love for both God and neighbors.

Faith, that is trust in Jesus to the point of even faithfulness to Jesus. Service, that is serving others, which comes from love.

And perseverance, that is endurance in the midst of pressures, which comes from trusting Jesus, which comes from faith.

[10:43] In verse 26, Jesus says, to the one who is victorious and does my will to the end. The literal translation there is to the one who is victorious and keeps my deeds to the end.

The same word is used there. The same word that is used in verse 19 is used there as well. And so the deeds of Christ very likely refer to these four deeds here.

And the Christians in Thyatira kept these deeds. And what's more, these four deeds have been increasing. They're doing it, they're doing them more than they had at first.

This is incredible. This is opposite to the church in Ephesus who has lost their first love. Considering the pressure that they had, that they're facing in the society, this increase in good deeds, in virtues, is commendable.

they have not gone cold. How easy is it for us to lose that first love for God, first fiery faith, first eagerness in service, and first energy in endurance.

[12:14] It's so easy, isn't it? And the longer we become Christians, the easier it is to decrease in love, faith, service, and endurance. But I think we ought to strive for the same praise from Jesus.

We ought to work that Jesus might say to us, I know your deeds, your love, and faith, your service, and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Imagine Jesus saying that to us. We should aim for that praise. I know quite a few Christians in this church who have been Christians for so long, and yet their love, and faith, and service, and endurance are just exceptional.

exceptional, exemplary. Well done. Well done to those people. Well done to you. You have given me something to look up to.

Something that I can try to emulate. But then, as previously, in the previous letter, Jesus continues with the bad.

[13:34] Verse 20 to 21. Nevertheless, I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching, she misleads my servants into sexual immorality, and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So again, this makes them opposite to the Christians in Ephesus.

The Christians in Ephesus are good at not tolerating false teachers, but bad at keeping their first love. The Christians in Thyatira are good at increasing their first love, but they tolerate the false prophet Jezebel, which is very likely a nickname taken from the Old Testament, sort of like Balaam from last week.

So, in the Old Testament, in 1 Kings 16, our first reading, Jezebel is the wife of King Ahab, who entices the whole Israel to worship Baal.

And so, in the same way, the woman in this text claims to be a prophet, and through her prophecies entices the Christians in Thyatira to eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexual immorality.

[15:00] And both are young in the context of temple worship of idols. So, they try to combine temple worship with the Christian faith.

Like some Christians in Pergamum, they want to belong to both worlds. They want to thrive and be accepted by the world by participating in pagan practices.

Jesus, and they also want to go to heaven when they die by worshiping Jesus. But unlike the church in Pergamum that has followers of false teaching, the church in Thyatira not only has, but tolerates in that text, and not only followers, but the leader, the prophet of the false teaching, this is bad news.

And so, Jesus' next words are very harsh in verse 22 and 23. So, I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways.

I will strike her children, that is, not literal children, but her followers or the members of her community, dead. Jesus will cause suffering for the false teacher and her followers.

[16:33] This probably refers to the time of suffering reserved for those who don't follow Jesus in Revelation 9. That says, they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads, that is, people who don't follow the God of the Bible.

They were not allowed to kill them, but only to torture them for five months, and the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes. During those days, people will seek death, but will not find it.

They will long to die, but death will elude them. This sounds scary, doesn't it? And it should. It's a warning for those who reject Jesus, especially those who call themselves Christians, but are being unfaithful by trying to combine faith in Jesus with worldly idolatry.

It's a stern warning. The suffering that they will suffer will be so bad that they will ask for death, but they will not find it.

And the only way out is to repent, which Jesus invites them to do in verse 22, unless they repent of her ways.

[18:10] Now, the warning is not only to make those people repent, repent, but also to give comfort to those Christians who are faithful to Jesus, but they struggle economically and socially because they are faithful to Christ.

I would imagine it would be easy for these faithful Christians to watch Jezebel and her followers and think, it's so unfair that they can thrive in this world because they worship those gods, while we, the faithful, struggle.

But Jesus says in verse 23, No, I will strike her children dead, then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

Jesus makes it clear that his eyes are indeed like blazing fire and can penetrate our hearts, and our minds, our whole soul, and he will repay the wicked according to their deeds.

They can thrive here in this world, but a scary future is awaiting them. Now, what about us today?

[19:35] Given the context of Thyatira, it would have been very easy to follow Jezebel's teaching, because she claimed to be a prophet, and her teaching was commercially beneficial.

If the Christians think they are allowed to participate in temple worship in addition to worshipping Jesus, then they can participate in the trade guilds and thrive professionally and financially.

people. What are the commercial and financial and social pressures now that might make us unfaithful to Jesus because we want to benefit in this world?

a friend of mine is an accountant in Indonesia, and in that country, so many, maybe even the majority of small and medium businesses fake their annual reports so that they can evade taxes.

it's even become a social expectation. If they don't do that, they can't keep their prices low, and they go bust because their competitors can't afford their prices low by evading their taxes.

[20:57] So that situation makes it hard for Christian accountants like my friend in that country. And so one day she was asked by her boss to create a fake financial report, and she could not do that, right?

So she shared her struggle at church, and she said, it's not only a matter of ethics. She felt like she would betray Jesus if she did it because she knew that Christ wants honesty and integrity and justice, what is right, what is fair.

And so by the end, her boss made her leave her job. Now, she wasn't fired for being a Christian, but she was fired because she held on to Christian values, honesty, integrity, justice, what the Old Testament calls righteousness.

And because she refused to conform to the social expectation, she held on to her Christian faith that demanded a lifestyle that's different to the world.

What are the commercial and financial pressures, or social pressures, that you are facing in your circles? Whatever they are, know that Jesus is the true Lord, and he is scanning our minds and hearts, our whole souls, and he knows what's going on, and he will judge accordingly.

[22:44] And if we stay faithful to him, he gives us some great promises in verse 24 to 28. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, I will not impose any other burden on you except to hold on to what you have until I come.

To the one who is victorious and does my will or keeps my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations. That one will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery.

Just as I have received authority from my Father, I will also give that one the morning star. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

So, to those who don't hold to the false teaching and try to combine Christ with the world, Jesus puts no other burden except to hold on to him and his works.

Of course, holding on to Jesus includes rejecting others, rejecting other gods except Jesus, rejecting other narratives except the gospel.

[24:07] But when we hold on, Christ will regard us victorious and he will let us participate in his rule as the king of kings.

that's what verse 27 to 28 promise. In verse 26, we will have authority over the nations. That's an attribute of Jesus.

But we will have that. And in verse 27, Jesus uses Psalm 2, which is a messianic psalm that refers to Jesus as the one who rules with an iron scepter, but he assigns that rule to us.

And again, in verse 28, the morning star refers to Numbers 24, a prophecy that says a star will rise out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel, he will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth.

Again, this is a messianic prophecy. The star is the ruling, the kingship of the Messiah. Jesus himself. But look who has that star, the one who conquers.

[25 : 24] He will give it to the Christians who stay faithful. Again, here we see a pattern of participation in Jesus.

As we participate in his suffering and in his death, we participate in his resurrected life, eternal life, and we will also participate in his kingship.

Kai, my son, has given me a lot of valuable lessons, and here is where I can learn from him again. Kai has this certain stubbornness in him, and he has recently learned how to turn on the TV using the remote, which is bad news for a two-year-old.

so now, every time he sees the remote, he just runs towards it, he grabs it, he holds on to it like his life depended on it, and he doesn't let go.

Even when we try to distract him with something that we think is better, hey, this is something better, he just goes, no! he holds on to it. It's annoying to his parents, but perhaps that's what we should do with Jesus.

[26 : 51] If we truly want him, if we truly want him, and his beauty, and his resurrected life, and to rule with him, we must run, run to him, embrace him, keep holding on to him, and reject all distractions, reject all worldly alternatives.

The world might say, hey, if you abandon Jesus, I'll give you money, a better precision network, acceptance by the society, but we must hold on to Jesus like my son holds on to the TV remote.

We must say, no! My life depends on this. in fact, rather than grabbing what the world offers, why not offer Jesus to them in a way that counters their culture and narrative, just like John does in, or Jesus does in verse 18.

Because if we stay faithful, our reward is great. We get to participate in Jesus' life, Jesus' deeds, and his perfect and just kingship with him by our side forever.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for reminding us of our rewards, that if we hold on to Christ, we will participate in his eternal life and glorious rule and his deeds, even as we participate in his suffering and death.

[28 : 44] So help us by the power of the Holy Spirit to persevere and hold on to Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen. Thank you. Thank you.