

Series Revelation

This Message #6 Revelation 2:18-29

As we progress in our studies of the church fellowships in the book of Revelation, I hope you recognize the concern Jesus had for their spiritual health. At the beginning of each letter, Jesus announced that “He knew” about the circumstances of believers. He complimented each fellowship on the attitudes and behaviors with which He was pleased, and He called to their attention the behaviors which needed to be changed.

Jesus was pleased about the rejection of false teachers from the congregation in Ephesus, but unhappy about the general lack of love for God and others which was there. In His comments to the church fellowship in Smyrna, Jesus complimented the members on how they were holding up in their afflictions and suffering. Jesus was pleased that the believers in Pergamum had remained faithful to His name in the face of pressures brought against them, but He was unhappy that the believers were tolerating heretical teaching in their fellowship and thereby compromising their faith.

That’s a very brief review of the three passages we have already studied. Now let’s read about Jesus’ assessment of the church in Thyatira.

Read Revelation 2:18-29

Thyatira was not as important a city as the ones we have previously studied. It was mostly a city of industry and manufacturing — a city of “blue collar” workers. Thyatira was known for its metal workers, fabric weavers, tanners, potters, shoemakers, wood workers, and many other such occupations.

There were many trade guilds in the city. Success in business depended on a person’s membership in one of these guilds. Each industry had its own semi-secret organization which blended the religious, professional, civic, and social needs of its workers. Each guild had its patron gods and goddesses and temple, and held its own idolatrous festival celebrations. Members met frequently for fellowship meals, and, in keeping with the pagan religious nature of the culture, the food was sacrificed to idols before being consumed, and there were occasions of sexual immorality.

Because of the pagan orientation of these guilds, craftsmen who became believers had to drop out of their guild activities if they wanted to sincerely follow Jesus. Coming to Christ meant the loss of their livelihood. For this reason, some believers were tempted to compromise their faith in order to earn a living and to support their families.

Jesus introduced Himself to the believers in Thyatira as “the Son of God.” There was a logical reason for this. The most prominent temple in the city of Thyatira was dedicated to Apollo, the son of Zeus. In Greco-Roman mythology, Zeus was the chief of the pagan gods. His titles were “King of the Gods,” and the “Father of Gods and men.” Apollo therefore was recognized by the Greeks and Romans as the son of the supreme god.

Jesus reminded the members of the church in Thyatira that He was the true “Son of God,” and that he was in ultimate control of their circumstances, rather than Apollo or the Roman emperor, who was also recognized as “the Son of the gods.” Believers who were being affected by the evil influences of their culture needed to remember that the words of Jesus had more authority than any pronouncements of earthly political rulers and the priests of cultic religions.

The next two descriptions of Jesus reinforce this thought. The “eyes” which were “like blazing fire” and the “feet” which were “like burnished bronze” were symbolic pictures of Jesus’ omniscience and omnipotence. His eyes could penetrate deeply into the thoughts and motives of every person. Nothing was hidden from Him. His feet were of a purer alloy than any metal that the craftsmen of Thyatira could refine in their furnaces. Jesus was not only aware of everything that was happening in the city and among believers, but He was prepared to exercise judgment.

Jesus was aware of four kinds of “deeds” performed by the members of the congregation. He complimented them on their “love,” “faith,” “service,” and “perseverance.” Love of God and of others is the highest of the Christian virtues (*Luke 10:27*), just as it is the most significant characteristic of God Himself (*1 John 4:8*). Love is, in fact, the characteristic from which all Godly actions happen. Love is the first characteristic that Jesus looks for in His church fellowships. You will remember that the Ephesian church no longer had this kind of love; that was the reason it was condemned.

“Faith” is the second important characteristic that Jesus looks for when He evaluates a church fellowship. Faith is the conviction that the information which God has revealed is true, but faith is much more than intellectual assent. Faith requires submission of the self to the guidance and control of the truth that God has revealed.

“Service” refers to the aid and help provided to others. The word used here implies voluntary activity for the benefit of others. Love and compassion are Godly motives for service.

“Perseverance” or “endurance” are needed when the believer faces opposition. Perseverance requires determination. It is the desire of the believer to please God in spite of pressures and difficulties. Jesus uses the term “overcomer” to describe the person who remains faithful to Him in spite of personal threats, persecution, and suffering.

At the end of verse 19, Jesus acknowledged that the quality of love, faith, service, and perseverance of the believers in Thyatira was increasing — that “they were doing more than they did at first.” The maturity level of the church fellowship was on the up-swing, and the believers were having more impact in their city than when the fellowship was younger. Jesus’ statement at the end of verse 19 was high praise for the fellowship.

Unfortunately, as great as the strengths of the fellowship were, there was a very significant problem. The believers were unwilling to take an active stand against false teaching in spite of the fact that there was a woman in their midst who was “misleading the servants of Jesus into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.”

To help the believers to understand the evil nature of the teachings of this woman, Jesus compared her with Jezebel, one of the most evil women in the Old Testament. Jezebel was the daughter of a pagan king who became the wife of Ahab, who was himself one of the most evil kings in the history of the northern part of Israel (*See I Kings 16:31-21:25; II Kings 9*). Jezebel encouraged the people of Israel to worship her pagan god Baal. It was the prophet Elijah who confronted the prophets and priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. I think you know the story about how God demonstrated His power by sending fire to burn up the sacrifice on the altar built by Elijah.

This woman in Thyatira was a member of the church fellowship. She claimed to be a prophetess and she had a reputation as a teacher⁴. She claimed to be one who taught the truths of God, but Jesus stated that she was actually sharing “Satan’s so-called deep secrets” (*verse 24*). She was deceiving and seducing members of the church into sin.

The error of this woman was the same as that of the Nicolaitans in Pergamum. They taught that believers did not need to separate themselves from their culture. Like them, this woman also advocated that believers should fully accommodate themselves to the ways of the pagan culture. I’m sure you recognize the temptation and appeal of her teaching to the believers who were craftsmen. By following her advice, they would be able to maintain their livelihood by being members of the trade guilds.

According to verse 21, Jesus had given the woman the opportunity to repent of her behavior. We do not know the circumstances under which this was offered, but she was unwilling to change. As a result, Jesus was ready to “cast her on a bed of suffering.”

The infliction of illness with pain is a not an uncommon punishment for unrepentant believers. The Apostle Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Corinthian Church when he gave instructions for participation in the Lord’s Table. He wrote that “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.” Paul said that “a man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” and then he explained the nature of the judgment: “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (*I Corinthians 11:27-31*).

The point is that God does not tolerate individuals who openly claim to be believers but who do not live as obedient believers. Such individuals presume on the grace of God. They pretend to be genuine believers while living in ways which are displeasing to God. This false prophetess in the church at Thyatira was one of those individuals, and her judgment was to be “cast on a bed of suffering.”

There are two groups of people associated with the woman mentioned in verses 22 and 23 — “those who commit adultery” with her, and those who are described as “her children.” Jesus had a word for each group. The warning in verse 22 was that those who had followed the teaching of the woman, who had been led “into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols,” would “suffer intensely” if they did not “repent of her ways.” In other words, they were being given a window of opportunity to change their behavior, but if they did not, they would experience the same judgment as the woman.

The “children” in verse 23 indicates a group of believers who had become so totally committed to the ways of the woman that they were, like the woman, refusing to repent. The Jezebel woman had essentially become their spiritual mother. Jesus was ready to strike them dead.

Jesus was going to pour out His judgment so that “all the churches would know that He was the One who searches hearts and minds,” and that “He will repay each believer according to his or her deeds.” One of the essential messages of the book of Revelation, indeed of all of Scripture, is that the hand of the Lord Jesus will fall on evildoers. For them, there is no escape. All church fellowships need to understand the seriousness of ungodly and unrepentant behavior. Jesus has the “eyes” and the “feet,” that is, the knowledge and the power, to uncover and remove every kind of evil from His people. The point is that church fellowships as well as individual believers must honestly examine their attitudes and behaviors, under the threat of judgment, which includes sickness and even death.

There is yet one more group of believers mentioned in verse 24. These are the faithful ones who “who did not hold to the teaching of the Thyatiran Jezebel and had not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets from her.” They had not succumbed to her deceptions. Jesus stated that He would “not impose any other burden on them” other than His expectation that they “hold on to (or persevere in) what they had already been doing.” Back in verse 19 Jesus had complimented them on their deeds of “love, faith, service, and perseverance.” Jesus wanted those actions to continue.

Each of the letters in chapters 2 and 3 concludes with a promise for overcomers. The promise in this letter is based on verses 26 and 28. The promise has two parts: overcomers will be given “authority over the nations” and they will receive the gift of “the morning star.” The phrase, “I will give authority over the nations,” is, confusingly, divided by the quotation of verse 27. The complete statement is: “I will give to the one who overcomes authority over the nations ... just as I have received authority from my Father.” In other words, Jesus was promising to pass on to His faithful followers the kind of authority He had received from His Father in heaven.

That is a remarkable promise. However, we must take note of the qualifiers in verses 25 and 26: the overcomer qualifies for this authority only if he “holds on to what he has until Jesus comes;” continues to overcome “to the end;” and “does Jesus’ will to the end.” The proof of authentic trust in Jesus is steadfast obedience until Christ returns or the believer dies.

Overcomers, by definition, are those believers who have been in a spiritual battle and have come through victoriously. They are the ones who will be given the special authority to “rule with an iron scepter” and “dash the nations to pieces like pottery.” The quotation is from the 2nd Psalm. That is the Psalm which describes how the Lord in heaven will deal with the rebellious kings and rulers of earth. The Lord explains that He has given authority to His King, His Anointed One, His Son. He said, “Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter. You will dash them to pieces like pottery” (*Psalm 2:8-9*).

The Father gave His authority to Jesus following the resurrection when He exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave Him the name which is above every name” (*Philippians 2:8*). At the present time, Jesus is “seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven” (*Ephesians 1:20*) where he is “reigning until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” The Apostle Paul informs us that “the end will come when he (Jesus) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power” (*I Corinthians 15:24-25*). It is that kind of authority that Jesus promised to share with overcomers.

No one knows exactly what role believers will have during the final confrontation between the rebellious leaders of earthly kingdoms and their armies and the Lord Jesus, but there are two verses in the latter chapters of the book of Revelation which give us some idea. These verses describe Jesus riding forth from heaven “to judge and make war,” and to “tread the winepress of the wrath of God Almighty.” “With him will be his called, chosen, and faithful followers.” At this confrontation Jesus “will strike down the nations with the sword which comes out of his mouth” and “he will rule them with an iron scepter” (*Revelation 17:14; 19:11,14, 15*). The authority of faithful believers will be significant, but details of Jesus’ promise are unknown.

The second gift offered to the overcomer is “the morning star.” This is another symbol with an uncertain meaning. One opinion is that “the morning star” links back to a verse in the book of Daniel, where it is promised that “those who turn many to righteousness will shine like the stars for ever and ever” (*Daniel 12:3*). “The morning star” may refer to its prominence in the heavens when night is over and a new day is dawning. Believers who are undergoing persecution would eagerly anticipate a new day when their troubles would be over.

Jesus Himself is described as “the bright morning star” in the last chapter of Revelation (*Revelation 22:16*). We know that Jesus allows His faithful followers to share in His glory. Perhaps the phrase means that faithful believers will become like and have the characteristics of Jesus Himself. The pressures of affliction certainly refine the spiritual attitudes of believers.

The letter ends with the invitation, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” We need to have well-tuned spiritual ears in order to block out the appeals of the world and to focus on the truth of the Scriptures. And may we, through deeds of love, faith, service, and perseverance, make a noticeable difference in our communities and world.

⁴ We need to remember that prophets, which included some women (*Acts 21:9; I Corinthians 11:5*), were essential to the growth of the 1st Century churches. The early churches did not yet have the New Testament, so believers were dependent on the teachings of itinerant apostles and prophets. The Holy Spirit spoke to and through both apostles and prophets to shape and guide the fellowships. It was the responsibility of the local fellowships to test and determine the truth of the teachings.