

**What Jesus Says to His Church**  
**Part 5: Thyatira—the Corrupt Church**  
**Revelation 2:18-29**  
**Sermon Summary**

We've arrived at the half-way point in our series, "What Jesus Says to His Church". so let's take a moment to step back and get a "30,000 foot" overview of where we've been thus far in our study of the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation. We saw in Revelation chapter 1 that Christians are beginning to be persecuted. John the Apostle, now very old—in fact, the last remaining apostle—is has been exiled to a island off the coast of Turkey. John had been a young man when Jesus walked the earth 60 years earlier. John heard a booming voice behind him, and he turned and saw seven golden lamp-stands; and in the middle of the lamp-stands he saw the exalted, glorified, triumphant Christ! It was terrifying! John hadn't seen Jesus for 60 years, and every other time John had seen Jesus he looked like just an average human being. The disciples walked with Jesus, touched him, ate with him. They had respectful, but very normal, interaction with him. They didn't, of course, view him as their equal. He healed the sick, walked on water, fed the 5,000. They knew he wasn't *merely* a man, but they were comfortable with him. The disciples didn't "chum it up" with him—Jesus was clearly the leader and no mere man—but they were comfortable around him. Jesus certainly didn't terrify them.

So it was quite a shock when Jesus revealed his glory to John! During his earthly ministry, Jesus' glory had been veiled. Only bits of it showed through from time to time. My main objective in this whole series is to help us all reconcile these seemingly incompatible images. On the one hand you've got the Jesus most of us know: a baby born in a manger, a friend who taught as no one else ever did and loved and cared for others, and a Savior who died on a cross for us—these images which are so familiar and dear to us—I'm trying to help us reconcile this with a terrifying image of a Lord and Judge who shines like the sun and has a sword coming out his mouth. For many people, these image are torn apart and cannot be reconciled. Or, *even if they can be* reconciled, some of us *don't think they want* the terrifying Jesus. *My main objective* in this series is to help us see *not only that* all of these images are *true*, and that they *necessarily belong together*, but that we're *glad* that they do. And, these truths are going to be critical in understanding Jesus' letter to Thyatira, which we'll begin looking at in a moment.

Jesus' infinite, perfect love is all tied together with his infinite, perfect wrath. You can't untie one of Jesus' traits from another, and it's this unity of his perfections that determine his interactions with us. Jesus is good—but he's *not* safe! In fact, it's *because* he's good that he's not safe. Because he cares deeply for goodness to flourish, he *must* stand against evil. Question: If you're a good mama or daddy, how do you feel when a kid on the playground knocks yours off the swing? At that moment, that bully better watch out— because you're a good mama or daddy! And because he's *infinitely* good, his revulsion against evil *also is infinite*. One is the measure of the other, because they're really just opposite sides of the same coin. To be committed to good *makes you* oppose evil.

And we'll see this in action in the church of Thyatira as Jesus' furious wrath at sin and his mind-boggling graciousness are on display. There's a woman named Jezebel, and Jesus says that he's going to kill her and her kids! And then, at the close of this letter *to the wickedest church we've yet encountered* in our study, Jesus will say "But if you'll just let me be your Savior, I'll also let you sit on my throne with me and rule the universe!" It's mind-boggling!

Jesus' Church in Thyatira *has a lot to say* to the church of today! Change the name and location, and we're going to see that those strange things going on 2,000 years ago in a place thousands of miles away are utterly contemporary and relevant. You've watched church services on the internet which exhibit the same errors that were occurring in Thyatira. When we unpack the issues going on in Thyatira, when we strip away the odd names and specific details, we're going to see that the same issues occur today. You've seen it on the internet— some of you will have been members of such churches—but you may not have recognized it as things that Jesus condemns and judges.

**Not everything** in these churches is evil. Jesus had some praise for Thyatira (v. 19). This is some hefty praise. Although in the following verse Jesus will criticize them severely, Jesus never lies, so this praise of the church of Thyatira is accurate and deserved. All of these traits—good deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance—all of these are commanded for believers. And the folks in Thyatira not only had all of them, they were increasing in these godly traits. And that word there, “love”. That’s the Greek word “agape”, which means God’s sort of love. Costly love that pours itself out for others. This church is the real deal. Many people proudly belong to such churches today. These churches are building clinics in the inner city. They’re hosting after-school tutorials for struggling students. They’re drilling wells to provide safe drinking water in sub-Saharan Africa. They’re rescuing women and girls from the sex trade in Southeast Asia. They’re shipping Operation Christmas Child boxes to millions of children worldwide, leading many to eternal salvation. **Good, godly** deeds. And all of them praised by our Lord Jesus. He says “**I know...and I approve.**” Isn’t this what we want to be true of our church? Isn’t this what we want to be true of ourselves? Are your deeds greater this year than last year? Is your love? Your faith? Your perseverance?

But he also says that good, godly deeds don’t give us a pass. They are not all that matter to the Lord Jesus. Those good deeds truly are a manifestation of God’s activity, but just because God is active in our midst doesn’t mean that he’s pleased with **everything** we do. That’s not the case. Just think about your spouse or the kids. They’re a mixed bag. You like the way he brings home a paycheck, but you don’t like the way he keeps clutter all over his dresser top. You like the way your kid does a school project, but you don’t like the way she picks on her sister. And you don’t give them a pass. You praise the good things and you criticize the bad. So does God (v. 20).

Jezebel was Old Testament character who was so wicked that her name has become used in a generic sense. Just like if someone calls you a “Judas”, what they’re saying is that you betrayed them. Jezebel has come to mean a godless person who uses power and cunning to corrupt others and spread wickedness. The church in Thyatira was tolerating a godless woman who cunningly led Jesus’ “bond-servants”—serious disciples—into immorality and idolatry. She called herself a prophetess—a person who receives messages from God. You’ve heard Bible teachers and pastors say things like, “God said to me...” or “The Lord told me...” Those are dangerous words—yet many people let them roll off their tongues with such ease. They’re claiming divine inspiration. Imagine when you’ve had someone say about you, “Well, Bob said that...” —but you said **nothing of the sort! You hate that.** So does God.

What has gone wrong in Thyatira? First, it appears that the church leaders in Thyatira were being disobedient to the clear command in Scripture, which says: “Do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority.” (1 Timothy 2:12). For some reason, God has said that pastors are to be men, but the church of Thyatira was not following this teaching, and it is so easy to fall into! Believe me, I know this is politically incorrect today—but do you see that even 2,000 years ago this church struggled to obey it? But for those of us who **claim** to live under the lordship of Christ, we must obey even the teachings of Scripture that we don’t understand—and don’t like! The church of Thyatira was not doing that, and neither is a church today which has female pastors and elders. We have many godly women here at TCC leading our church through counseling, Bible studies, mentoring, and various teaching venues. But we don’t cross the line the Scriptures draw: pastors and elders are to be men. Men **aren’t** smarter than women—but we **also must not** think that we’re smarter than God. When he clearly commands something, we must obey him—even when we don’t like it or understand why it matters to him. That’s what makes him God, and us not.

Then it got even worse: this false prophetess and unauthorized teacher was leading believers to commit acts of immorality and involve themselves in idolatrous worship. And the church was **tolerating** this. Now, in our culture, tolerating is a virtue. I agree. I’m glad people are kind and tolerate my quirks. But

aren't we glad that our laws don't tolerate sex trafficking and rape and burglary? God says that there are things that we **must not** tolerate. Disobedience to the clear teachings of the Bible tops the list. But Thyatira did tolerate evil—and so many churches today. But wait! We're not eating things sacrificed to idols, are we? Nope. We don't even have idols, do we? Let's think about that.

Idolatry is first and foremost an attitude of the heart. God's Word says: "These men have set up idols in their hearts" (Ezekiel 14:3a) and "Don't be greedy, for greed amounts to idolatry" (Colossians 3:5b). Whoa! Greed in your heart = idolatry?! Our goose is cooked! In Thyatira they **did** have **physical** altars and idols, but we have our **immaterial** ones. The continual quest for "more"—more money, more stuff, more entertainment, more sex, more status... More, more, more. It's in every one of our hearts. The biblical view is that **God** is the source and sum of blessing, that we were created to bring our lives into orbit around him—and not vice-versa—and that happiness is a by-product of having God on the throne of our hearts (Psalm 16:11). God **cares about** joy, pleasure, and happiness. He's the **most joyful being** in the universe. He **invented** it. But what do we so often substitute in his place? Do we turn to alcohol? Vacations? Gaming? Food? A secret relationship? We've made pleasure our idol, our demand, rather than following **God's path for our life**, and discovering fullness of joy as the by-product. Idolatry exists in the heart long before it ever manifests itself physically. This is what Jesus—in his love—calls Thyatira to turn from. And he calls us too as well—because he loves us.

The Book of Revelation opens with a terrifying yet tender revelation of Jesus. His dazzling moral purity knocks us over—and then his touch reassures us not to be afraid. Jesus is **for** us, **not against** us. He **is** against sin, and so he purifies us. We began today's sermon with a review of Jesus' awesome revelation of himself because it factors significantly in his letter to his church in Thyatira. He opened the letter by highlighting his divinity, calling himself "the Son of God". He then pointed out his flaming eyes, that see into the dark places of our lives, and his flaming feet, which stamp out opposition.

What comes next in this letter is shocking (v. 22-23). This is **Jesus** speaking—but this ain't the image of Jesus most of us have. As I said, Jesus is **good**—but he's **not** safe! Jesus gave his life to purify a people for himself, and he **will** have a pure people. He's patient—he even would have forgiven Jezebel—but she didn't want him. Jesus says that he will give to each one of us according to our deeds, and since Jezebel led others into a bed of adultery, Jesus says he'll throw her onto a bed of sickness. Those who commit adultery with her will receive great tribulation. And her "children"—I take that to mean her "spiritual children"—those who received her wicked teaching and are helping her spread it—Jesus says **he'll kill them!** This is **not** figurative; the Greek literally reads: "I will kill them with death." Jesus ain't no "cuddle bunny"! God typically leaves most of his judgment on our sin for the Day of Judgment, but he reserves the right to intervene whenever he wishes. The Book of Acts records a time when a couple lied to God, and he struck them dead on the spot. First Corinthians says that God struck some in that church with illness and killed others. From time to time he brings judgment sooner rather than later, and his purpose is to help the rest of us take him seriously. That's what Jesus' letter to his church in Thyatira says.

Right after he tells about the judgment he's bringing on Jezebel and her ilk, he says this: "...and all the churches—plural—will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts." Although Jesus doesn't **compare** churches to each other—he doesn't say, "Why can't you be more like Smyrna?!"—Jesus does want us to **learn** from each other. When we see a church ruin it's witness through immorality, we should learn to become more fearful of our own tendency to sin and self-destruction. When we see an

accounting scandal in another church, we should be sobered by the greed in our own hearts, and we should review our accounting practices. When we see out-sized egos making decisions at other churches, we should humble ourselves, because we're capable of any sin. Jesus searches our hearts and minds with those fire-eyes of his. Jesus stamps out sin in his church with those fire-feet of his. He does this because he **loves us**, and **therefore he hates what sin has done to this world**. He hates intensely **because** he loves intensely.

That love brings us to the shocking close to this shocking letter (v. 26-28). We've seen that each letter to the churches addresses a promise to "him who overcomes", and by now we know what that means: "over-comers" are **true** children of God, "over-comers" are those who truly are **born-again**. **God makes** all of his true children overcome. **He gives us** victory. But Jesus' letter adds one element that none of the others do. Jesus adds an identifying note: over-comers keep Jesus' deeds their whole life. The word "and" here doesn't signify that these are two different groups who receive the same promise, but rather an additional identifier of God's children. Jesus' letter to his church in Thyatira has a special emphasis on deeds that none of the other letters have. The word "deeds" appears a dozen times in these seven letters, **but almost half** of those occurrences are in this one letter. Jesus spoke of **their** good deeds, of the fact that their deeds were increasing. Jesus spoke of **Jezebel's** wicked deeds. Jesus said he'd give to each of us according to **our** deeds. And here he says that over-comers keep **his** deeds to the end. How we live really matters (Ephesians 2:8-10). We're not saved **by** good works— **but we are** saved **for** good works. They are **God's** works, which **he** prepared for **us** to do.

And the letter closes with this mind-blowingly gracious offer: Over-comers will be given authority over the nations. We will rule them with a rod of iron, and break them to pieces like pottery. Here, Jesus is saying that over-comers will rule with him. And remember, "over-comers" are not supermen, but super sinners who allow Jesus to save them. If you're saved, you're an over-comer. If you're saved, you will reign with Christ throughout eternity, ruling the nations under Jesus' supreme lordship. Do you get that?!

Sometimes we think: *"Jesus, I've disappointed you so many times. You're probably sick of me. If you'll just get me to heaven, I'll stay in the furnace room in the basement. You'll never have to see me. I'll stay out of your way. But thank you for a spot in heaven."*

Have **you** ever thought anything like that? As a new Christian **I** remember having that thought. I've since learned that it's unbiblical and doesn't fit with how gracious he is toward those in his family. All those whom Christ saves are given **his** righteousness. All those who are saved have the very righteousness of God. We didn't earn it, of course. It was **given** to us. But it's **ours** nonetheless.

Not only do we get God's righteousness, we get **him**. One of Jesus' names is "the Morning Star". Jesus gives over-comers "the morning star". He gives us **himself!** **If** you make it to heaven, you **can't** hide in the basement, **because Jesus doesn't stay in the basement**. Jesus promises heaven in **all seven** of the letters. He phrases it in different ways. But **here**, to his church in Thyatira, to the church which has been involved in **the grossest sin described thus far**, to **this** church Jesus describes heaven in the **most gracious, glorious terms yet: Not just** some hidden manna, and **not just** a mysterious white stone with a name on it, as in Pergamum. **Not just** avoiding the second death, as in Smyrna. **Not just** eating of the tree of life in the paradise of God, as in Ephesus. **But reigning with Christ, and literally "having" Christ! My goodness! What kind of a God** do we have?! We have the kind of God who deserves our worship and obedience.