

Sermon – 10/12/2006 am

The Church at Thyatira

Study Text: Revelation 2:18-29

Down the road from where we lived in India was a large factory. Out the front of this factory was a shrine, housing a colourful idol. Workers would bow to this idol as they came to work each day. Once a year they would celebrate the auspicious day of this god. The managers and employees would make offerings to this god and join in an extravagant feast. Imagine what was like for a Christian friend of ours, the only Christian who worked in this factory.

Until recently we have had compulsory student unions in our universities. All students had to pay fees to this union. What happened to their money? Often it was used to buy a keg of beer for a drunken party. Christian students were pressured to join in – after all it was their money being spent!

Thyatira was trading city, well known for its trade guilds. These included woollen and linen workers, tanners and potters, and dealers in purple cloth. Lydia who heard the gospel at Philippi was from Thyatira (Acts 16:14). If you wanted to live in this city you had to belong to a guild or union. These guilds had their chosen deities and membership implied worship of this deity. All members were expected to attend the feasts held to honour the chosen deity. Food offered to idols would be eaten at such feasts, which usually ended in revelry and gross immorality. What was Christian to do in this situation? Not to attend, or to walk out, would bring ridicule and even persecution.

Jesus

The message to the angel of the church at Thyatira came from the Son of God. This is the only occurrence of this title in this book. In his first vision John saw one like the Son of Man. Psalm 2 which is quoted in this message refers to the Son of God. The Son of God had *eyes like a flame of fire, and feet like fine brass* (2:18).

His piercing eyes searched the hearts and minds of the people (2:23). Nothing escapes the gaze of the risen Jesus. The all-seeing God not only sees but judges, as we will see shortly. His eyes are like flames of fire, ready to destroy his enemies, and his feet are ready to tread down his enemies and the enemies of his people.

The message to Thyatira, like that to the other churches, begins with a commendation. *I know your works, love, service, faith and your patience* (2:19). What a superb commendation. This church was strong in the faith and love of Jesus Christ. They were patient and persevering in the face of persecution. They were pressing on in the faith and not growing cold. They had not left their first love. Their last works were even *more than their first*.

But such good works and such growth in the church was no excuse for laxity with regard to false teachers and discipline in the church. Just because a church has a great ministry and is growing rapidly does not mean that it is right before the Lord.

Jezebel

Jesus had something against the church at Thyatira. He condemned them for tolerating that woman Jezebel, a self-proclaimed prophetess (2:20). Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Prophecy was a gift of the Spirit in the early church, as it is today, but maybe in a somewhat different form. This woman was to be rejected not because she was a woman or a prophetess, but because of her teaching. In the grace of Jesus she was given time to repent but did not.

Just as the church at Ephesus tested those who claimed to be apostles so this church should have tested those who claimed to be prophets. They must be tested by the Scriptures, the inspired Word of God. The New Testament was not complete at this time, but still the teaching of the twelve apostles was authoritative. This woman was not the first, nor will be the last, to teach what itching ears want to hear, things that are pleasing to man's sinful nature.

Who was Jezebel and what did she teach? Jezebel was probably not her real name but one given by Jesus. King Ahab of Israel took a foreign wife called Jezebel. She bought her gods to Israel and set up a temple to Baal in Samaria (I Kings 16:31). She seduced Ahab and the people of God into worshipping Baal and destroyed many true prophets, thereby arousing the anger of the Lord. Through Elijah the Lord declared drought and famine on the nation because of Jezebel and the people's adultery.

The Jezebel at Thyatira was seducing members of the church into *sexual immorality and eating things sacrificed to idols* (2:20). These sins were exactly the same as those in the church at Pergamum (2:14). Jezebel was teaching an old doctrine, the doctrine of Balaam, the doctrine of compromise with the world. She claimed it was deep knowledge (2:24), but in truth it was just an old heresy being recycled.

False teaching is rarely a direct attack upon the Scriptures. False teachers do not usually encourage blatant disobedience to the commands of Jesus. What they proclaim is some new teaching, some secret knowledge or special revelation. The church had not yet passed into the second century when Gnostic heresy spread in the churches, but John was probably countering the beginnings of this heresy in his letters. One aspect of this heresy was that matter, including the body, was evil and the spirit was good. Some Gnostics deliberately indulged in licentious behaviour since the body was evil anyway.

Just what the 'depths' of Jezebel's teaching were we are not told, but something aligned to Gnosticism would have allowed Christians at Thyatira to join in the feasting and immorality of the pagans and avoid persecution. Many in the church at Thyatira were caught up in the 'deep teaching' of Jezebel, but Jesus calls such teaching by its proper name *the depths of Satan* (2:24).

The Lord has revealed all that we need to know in the Scriptures. We are blessed when we read and obey what is written (1:3). If someone comes to you claiming 'deep' or 'secret' knowledge you can be sure it is not of God but of Satan. They may claim they have had a special revelation. 'The Lord told me it is right to divorce your wife or husband' they may say. But in Scripture the Lord says 'I hate divorce' (Malachi 2:16). 'Oh that is old stuff' they will say, 'I have been given new knowledge'.

We have recently had the 'new perspective on Paul' proclaimed by eminent scholars. They have studied extra-Biblical documents and believe that the Reformation got it wrong with the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.

Judgment

The message of Jesus was that Jezebel had failed to repent of her sexual immorality in the time he had graciously given her, and that the time for judgment had arrived. Divine judgment is a major theme of Revelation, as is justice for the people of God. Judgment will begin in the house of God. False teachers must be removed by the church – if not Jesus will remove them and the church will suffer also.

I will cast Jezebel on a sickbed (2:22). Jesus promised to afflict her with some physical sickness. She would be stopped from teaching heresy. Those ‘who committed adultery with her’, or who listened to her and sought to adjust their Christian profession to practices involved in being a member of a trade guild would also come under divine judgment – *unless they repent of their deeds.*

I will kill her children. Who were her children that would be punished by death? It is not clear whether this reference to her children is literal or metaphorical, but in the context it more likely metaphorical. Maybe it refers to her close and committed followers – an inner circle. The disciples of a sect leader can be more wicked than the leader himself. Jezebel’s children are condemned to death.

The death of Ananias and Saphira is another example of such divine judgment. After their death great fear came upon all the church (Acts 5:11). It would be the same at Thyatira. *All the churches will know that I am he who searches the minds and hearts (2:23).* God will not be mocked. He will be glorified in his church, and in all the earth.

Justice

What of those who held to true doctrine, or repented and returned to the Lord? **Firstly**, they were promised that they would not be put under any other burden. Maybe this refers to what the Jerusalem Council wrote to the new, predominantly Gentile, churches in Acts 15. The danger a church faces when it seeks to remove false teaching is introducing its own creeds and confessions as a test of orthodoxy. The members become burdened by new rules in an effort to weed out the unorthodox. Such a reaction is not necessary. Jesus simply told them to hold fast to what they had till he came.

Secondly, Jesus promised justice in the end. Though they did not get justice in this city, they would in the end – if they kept his works until the end (2:26). In Jesus they would have power not only over their persecutors in this city but over the nations. Psalm 2 speaks of the Son ruling with a rod of iron and smashing them like a potter’s vessel – an appropriate image for this city of trade’s people. The saints will judge the world (I Corinthians 6:2).

Thirdly, *I will give him the morning star (2:28).* It is not clear what this means, but the star was a symbol of royalty. A star guided the wise men to Jesus and to worship him as King. *The morning star will rise in your hearts* wrote Peter referring to the Last Day (II Peter 1:19). Jesus is the bright and morning star (Revelation 22:16). Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you who believe in him. He will come again and receive you unto himself (John 14:3).

Are you looking forward to that Day? Will it be judgment or justice for you? What do you think about the morning star rising in your heart? Hold fast to the truth you have in Jesus Christ. Do not stumble through false teaching or compromise with the world.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon