

The Corrupt Church: Thyatira

18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write,

*‘These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: **19** “I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. **20** Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. **21** And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. **22** Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. **23** I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.*

24 “Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. **25** But hold fast what you have till I come.

26 And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—

27 ‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron;

They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’ —

*as I also have received from My Father; **28** and I will give him the morning star.*

29 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The church I grew up in met for many years in a recreation centre, until it bought its own building, which was a whole city block. As renovations and repairs began, one of the first things we did was to get on the roof. The whole building had a huge flat roof, made of corrugated iron. And everywhere you looked, rust was eating away at the iron.

Now, from the ground, no one would ever see the roof. Had we simply painted over the rust, no one on the ground would have known, and those in the surrounding high-rise buildings would have looked down upon what seemed like a shiny new roof. But had we done that, the rust underneath the paint would have continued to eat away at the structure and one day, regardless of how nice the paint would have looked, the water would have begun pouring in.

I can tell you that kneeling on a hot corrugated iron roof with a wire brush and sandpaper in your hand is not fun; there's a temptation to just walk away, ignore it, and paint over it. But ignoring corruption doesn't make it go away. It just gives it more time to get worse.

Rust, mold, rot, and decay are forms of corruption. They eat away and destroy what is good and, interestingly, they are not static. Once they set in, they spread and eat away until they are checked by vigorous action, or until they destroy the thing they are eating away at. These physical kinds of corruption are pictures for us of a deeper and more dangerous kind of corruption: spiritual corruption, moral corruption. Sin, worldliness, false doctrine, false worship, hypocrisy, divisiveness, murmuring and discontent, are forms of corruption that begin in a church. If they are tolerated, if they are not stopped and checked, they spread, and consume, and destroy.

The church at Thyatira is a model example of what happens when corruption is allowed to spread. The previous church, Pergamos, was the compromising church, and was warned to deal with compromise. But the church at Thyatira had tolerated the compromise, left it, and turned a blind eye, until it had now ravaged and corrupted the vast majority of the church.

Studying this church will teach us the great seriousness of tolerating evil in our midst. It will teach us what happens when we are aware of some kind of corruption and we let it go, ignore it and hope someone else deals with it. We will learn that church maintenance is like home maintenance: there is always something to fix. In a fallen world, as much as there will always be rust, leaks, cracks, mold, and dust, which will have to be continually maintained or else risk greater ruin, so the church, made up of sinners saved by grace, will continually have to combat in its own ranks false teaching, sinful practices, compromise with worldliness, divisive attitudes and wrong worship. To imagine the church will one day reach a problem-free place is to be like someone wishing he could have a house which does not get dirty.

Even more importantly, this letter will teach us how the Lord of the church feels about tolerated corruption. How does Christ, the Head of the church, the Bridegroom of the church, respond to this moral mold, this spiritual cancer in His church?

As in each of these letters, we'll consider the commendation, the condemnation, the caution and counsel, and the challenge.

I. The Commendation

19 *"I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first."*

The Lord begins to commend this church in Thyatira. What was it like to be the church in Thyatira? Well, this was the smallest city of these seven churches. It lay around 60 kilometres to the east of Pergamos. What was distinctive about Thyatira is that it was a manufacturing city. This was a city known for making things: purple dye, clothes, pottery, brass. You might remember someone from the book of Acts who was from this city: a lady by the name of Lydia. Lydia was a seller of purple clothes, and Acts 16:14 tells us she was from this city, and she met and heard Paul and his companions when there were in Philippi.

For us, purple clothing might not seem like a big deal, but in the Roman era, purple dye was extremely hard to come by. There were only two sources of purple dye. The one was from the root of a plant, called the madder-root which grew around Thyatira. The second was from a shellfish called a Murex. From the throat of that little sea-creature would come only one drop of purple dye. So you can imagine how rare and prized purple dye was, which explains why royalty was often clothed in purple, and why the Bible uses it as a metaphor for wealth. This was one of the things Thyatira was world-famous for.

Once you have a city with all this manufacturing, you also had guilds, similar to the unions today. There were various trade guilds in Thyatira, a tanners' guild, a potters' guild, a weavers' guild, a brass-makers' guild, and so on. And with these guilds came religion and religious feasts, and that's where the problem came for this church.

But before we see how that had affected them, the Lord commends them. He says that among them there are several works to be praised:

I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first.

The Lord Jesus says that they are a church with love, unlike the Ephesian church. They are a serving church, busy with works of ministry. They are a church with faith, both trusting and remaining faithful. They are a church with endurance and patience, sticking to the task. The Lord even notes that there has been real growth in the life of this church. Their love, faith, service, patience is better than when they started.

But as we know, the Lord is going to give a lengthy condemnation, the longest letter of the seven. And this should tell us something important. The Ephesian church had a lot of sound doctrine and good service, but no love, and Jesus told them to repent. The church at Thyatira had love and some good service, but had clearly tolerated huge error and evil. The Lord Jesus does not accept love without truth, nor does He accept truth without love.

We have said before that the Christian life and therefore a Christian church needs three things to be right: orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. Orthodoxy is right doctrine: the biblical Gospel, and the whole Bible taught properly. Orthopraxy is right practice: the correct application of the Word of God to worship and discipleship, a life of holiness and conformity to Christ. Orthopathy is right love, or right desire (*pathos* = desires, emotions, affections). We are to love God wholeheartedly, love our neighbours as ourselves, and love what He loves and hate what He hates. We love Him ultimately, and supremely, and appropriately. And if any of these three drops out, you have a problem.

Right doctrine without right practice is the dead faith James described. Right doctrine without right love is dead formalism or even legalism that the Ephesian church was condemned for, and which Paul said puffs up. Right practices without right doctrine just becomes pragmatism or innovation. Right practices without right loves is dead Pharisaism, to which Jesus often said, “I will have mercy and not sacrifice.” Right affections without orthodoxy is sheer enthusiasm or fanaticism, what Paul called zeal without knowledge. Right affection without right practices is sentimentalism and pure emotionalism. And once one goes, the others are no longer right.

So here there is a commendation for being a loving church, but it is clearly not enough, because as we'll see, their love lacked discernment. Their love was like a train without railway tracks. Undirected love, affections without judgement becomes a wild and dangerous thing.

II. The Condemnation and the Caution

20 Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. 22 Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. 23 I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.

Here is the problem. There is this woman Jezebel and what she does, but then there is also *what the church does with this woman*. And what does Jesus say the church is guilty of doing with this woman Jezebel? They allow her to teach and seduce. They tolerate her. Even those who do not necessarily agree with her are not acting to stop her. They are painting over the rust, letting it go on, pretending it will not damage anything.

So who and what were they tolerating? Jesus refers to the woman Jezebel. Now more than likely this was not her actual name, because who names their daughter Jezebel? Jezebel does tell us a lot about her character though. The Old Testament Jezebel was the wife of king Ahab. She was the daughter of the king of the Sidonians, and a passionate worshipper of Baal. She it was who introduced Baal worship into Israel, which involved all kinds of filthy acts of immorality. She was a wicked and murderous woman, who sought to kill Elijah, and had an innocent man, Naboth, falsely accused and murdered. She acted boisterously and clearly led her weak husband, Ahab.

So to call this woman in the church *Jezebel* was to say several things about her: she was an unbeliever, she was immoral, she had personal designs on power and control, and she was not under authority. She called herself a prophetess, and this may be how she got people to hear her. But clearly the church at Thyatira was not testing the prophecy and abstaining from evil and holding fast to what was good.

And she had begun to teach the church at Thyatira to commit sexual immorality and to eat food offered to idols. Now, how would this have happened?

Well, remember that Thyatira had all these trade guilds? If you were to make your living in Thyatira, you needed to belong to one of these. And here was where the problem came. Each one of the guilds had a god, a patron deity; each guild had its special days with feasts that usually included immorality, and knowingly eating food in honour of that false god. Just like in Smyrna, just as in Pergamos, there was economic pressure to compromise with the world, sweep it under the carpet, accept it for the sake of money.

Somehow, this woman convinced the believers to partake, to compromise, to accept the corruption. This could not have been easy, because back in Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council had given a clear recommendation to all Gentile churches throughout the world. "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality." We don't know how she did it. Maybe she took the false teaching that was entering in the late first century that said the body is evil, the spirit is good, so it doesn't matter what you do with the body. Go ahead, partake in the idol feasts, partake in the immorality, it's just the body, God doesn't care what you do with the body, it's the soul that matters, and your soul is completely removed from those things. So go ahead.

However she did it, we see so many just like her in the church today. We find people who teach and seduce Christians to watch what is filthy and listen to what is filthy, and themselves participate in what is filthy, and when people question them on it, they say, "We're not under the Law, we're under grace!" They say, "Don't let those pharisaical legalists bring you back into bondage. We're free! We're free in Christ!" Yes, we're free, but Peter says in 1 Peter, do not use your freedom as a cloak for sin. Do not use your liberty as an excuse for evil. Or they say, "It doesn't matter what you do. Once you're saved, you're always saved, so you can do whatever you want. In fact, the more you sin, the more you glorify the work of Christ on the cross in getting you to heaven."

And so we have many voices around us telling us that in the Bible there is no doctrine of separation from sin, no doctrine of separation from worldliness, no doctrine of separation from false doctrine. These voices say, probably like this Jezebel did, "If you listen to that, you'll never get ahead in life. You'll never enjoy all there is. Come on, live a little, relax, we're under grace."

Grace is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin. It is freedom to love God, which means loving what He loves and hating what He hates.

What should this church have done with her? They should have disciplined her. They should have confronted her, called on her to stop, and then disciplined her had she continued. But they didn't. They did what too many churches do when they find within their midst they have a false teacher, or a hypocrite, or a grumbler, or a divisive man, or a gossip, or some kind of moral or spiritual adulteress. They say, "We don't want unpleasantness. Let's hope the problem goes away by itself."

When a church does not get its own house in order, it has sealed its own fate. Because Jesus says what is about to happen.

21 And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. **22** Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. **23** I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.

Jesus gave everyone time. He gave the church time to stop tolerating her, but they kept compromising. He gave this Jezebel time to repent, but she did not. It's implied that He had even given her children, those who followed her teaching, time to repent.

But if there is never a day of judgement, then calls to repent don't make any sense. Repentance only makes sense because God is going to judge, and He gives second chances before that time. But there is a deadline. For this woman, it looked like this: since she wanted all her immorality, she would get an appropriate judgement - a sickbed, which implies more than an ordinary bed, but the ultimate bed, the grave itself. She wanted a bed, she'll get the ultimate one. All those who participate in her evil, all those who follow her teaching will be thrown into great tribulation and even death.

Sometimes God can bring this kind of chastisement upon the church, such as Ananias and Saphira, such as the believers in Corinth. In fact, when He does, it means there is still some sign of life. God does not discipline Satan's children, He disciplines His own. One of the worst signs is when rampant evil is present in a church, and no chastisement follows. At that point, you can pretty much write Ichabod on the door – the glory has departed.

But it is a horrifying prospect. And it brings us back to how Jesus describes Himself to this church: *'These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass:*

Eyes like a flame of fire speaks of Christ's all-seeing eyes of judgement. Nothing is hid from Him. He sees through, and His glance can purify the gold from the dross. No excuses will work with Him, no half-truths, no blame-shifting, no exaggerating. He knows what we do, and why we do it. Feet like fine brass probably speaks of His purity, and that He walks up and down in His churches, owning them as Lord, and expecting them to be pure.

When they tolerate sin, and allow it to spread in the name of being loving and tolerant and nice, they are not pleasing Him; they are pleasing themselves. Jesus says, when I come and do this, the churches will know I am He who searches the minds and hearts and I will give to each one of you according to your works.

He sees every effort to purify His church, and He sees every effort to destroy His church. He sees sin tolerated, and sin rebuked, And He will reward each individual Christian for his or her works in the church.

III. The Counsel

24 *"Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. 25 But hold fast what you have till I come.*

The Lord understands that the faithful ones in Thyatira are now in the minority. Their situation was not like ours, where we can come out of a corrupt situation, and find ourselves a church that is pure. They had only one church, and so Jesus says, I am not going to ask you to do anything except hold fast to the doctrine, and practice and loves that you do have until My judgement comes. Don't give in to the gravity of decay; don't surrender to the momentum of compromise; don't let the mould, the rust, the decay creep in to you. Resist the downhill pull of evil and false doctrine and false worship.

Sometimes we will find ourselves in situations where the corruption is so widespread, that the most you can do is hold fast to what you have. By the way, that's why we refer to ourselves as conservatives. Not because we wear tall black hats or think smiling is a sin, but because we want to conserve something. We want to conserve what Christ has given us: the faith. We want to hold on to it, and in an evil age, you do that. You conserve orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy, and you hand it on to the next generation. Not a rusted, decayed, moldy Christianity, but the original article.

Don't tolerate the corruption, hold fast to the pure faith to pass it on. For those who do, Jesus has some very encouraging words of challenge and promise.

IV. The Challenge

26 *And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—*

27 *'He shall rule them with a rod of iron;*

They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels' —

as I also have received from My Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star.

29 *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

To the true believer, who is known for keeping Christ's works to the very end, here is a promise. Jesus will give that believer power over the nations. He then quotes from Psalm 2, "He shall rule them with a rod of iron, they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels." That psalm is a Messianic Psalm, where the Father promises the Son all the nations for His inheritance, where He will rule them with a rod of iron, and dash to pieces those who oppose Him. Kings are encouraged to kiss the Son and pay homage, lest He be angry.

Jesus promises the believer a share in that kingdom glory, and kingdom authority. Now when will this happen? Well, ask yourself, who needs to be ruled with a rod of iron? Does Jesus need to rule all the saints in glory with a rod of iron? No, they are happily submitted to Him. You rule with a rod of iron, when there are sinful people and sinful nations that would rebel if given half a chance. This, to me, is evidence for a Millennial kingdom on the earth, that will include unglorified human beings with sin natures. A time of peace, and prosperity, but a time where God's order and beauty are brought to bear through a rod of iron.

And I think it is instructive that Jesus promises believers who do not tolerate evil , they will experience this. Because if you are a man-pleasing mouse during this life, why should you be given authority over sinful nations in the future? If in your stewardship here, you were tolerant of all kinds of evil in a small local church, why should you be entrusted with enforcing law and order over entire nations in the Millennial kingdom? If you have been faithful over little, you shall be rewarded with authority over much.

Jesus encourages us: you who put your foot down, and say no to sin now, you are proving your fitness to rule over there. I will happily place you in My government and have you administer justice and the beauty of My Law there, because you showed how much you loved it here.

The second promise is the morning star. This is harder to understand, but later in the same book, we have the best clue. Revelation 22:16 which says, “I am the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star.” I think this simply means that we will receive Him and His glory. Like Daniel said, many of the righteous will shine like the sun, we will reflect the glory of the Lord.

When we are timid, when we feel that the only real virtue is to be tolerant of everything, we need to remember Him whose eyes are like fire, and whose feet are like fine brass. He is tolerant of weakness, but intolerant of sin. He wants us to be intolerant of it too.

There's not much glory in opposing sin right now. You will probably be disliked and hated. But there is glory coming. If we will love what He loves and hate what He hates, He says, you'll rule at my side, and share my glory.