

The Corrupted Church

Revelation 2:18-29

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As we journey through the seven letters to the seven churches, we discover the marks of the true church. What are the qualities of a true and living church? Let me rehearse them for you.

When we looked at Ephesus, we saw in chapter 2, verse 4, that they had left or abandoned their first love or their first devotion to God. So the mark of a true church is love. Jesus said, "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another." So we are to be a loving church.

The second church was that of Smyrna. They were a persecuted, suffering church. In Revelation 2:10, the Lord said, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer." The Bible says that "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will..."—not "might," not "maybe"—"...suffer persecution." It's impossible to live in the light and face the darkness and not be affected by the world, to be persecuted by the world.

The third mark of the church we saw in the church at Pergamos. It is truth. Revelation 2:13 says, "You hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith."

So in the first three churches we have in Ephesus, love; in Smyrna, suffering; in Pergamos, truth.

Now we come to Thyatira, the fourth of the seven churches, verses 18-29. This is what I call "the corrupted church." Why were they corrupt? Verse 20 says, "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." So the fourth mark of the church should be holiness.

The church is to be loving; suffering; a truthful, doctrinally sound church; and it is to be a church that is not corrupted by the sexual immorality and idolatry of the world around it. It is to be marked by holiness. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:15-16, "As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'" He quoted from Leviticus 11:44. The verse from Leviticus is repeated several times. God's people are to be marked by holiness.

The attribute of God that is most often mentioned in the Bible is holiness. It's not God's love—He is loving; it's not God's mercy—He is merciful; it's not God's patience, kindness or power—He is all of those things. It's God's holiness. When God wants us to know what kind of God He is, He reveals that He is a holy God. When Isaiah saw God's shekinah glory filling the temple, he said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory!" The holiness of God means there is no sin in Him, and He is perfectly righteous. So if we are born of God, or the children of God, we should be marked by holiness as well.

I first of all want you to notice, in verse 18, the destination, which is the city and church in Thyatira. "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write..." This letter is the longest of the seven letters, and it is addressed to the least important of the seven cities. Thyatira is located about 45 miles southeast of Pergamos. The city was established as a Macedonian colony by Alexander the Great 300 years before Christ. It had a commercial rather than a political distinction. It was the headquarters of many ancient guilds or unions. There was the potter's guild, the tanner's guild, the weaver's guild, the baker's guild, the bronze worker's guild and the dyer's guild.

It's interesting that in Acts 16, Paul went into the city of Philippi in Macedonia or modern-day Europe, and the first convert on the European continent was a woman, Lydia. She was from Thyatira. She was a businesswoman, a seller of purple dye and cloth. Many believe that she went back to Thyatira, and there she actually led people to Christ, the church was then born and got established. Or it could be that during Paul's stay in Ephesus, the Gospel probably went out to these other cities near it, including Thyatira.

Now why do I mention the guilds or unions in Thyatira? Because it comes into play in the church there. If you lived in Thyatira and you wanted to make a living or work, you had to belong to a union or one of these guilds. But all of these guilds worshipped false, pagan gods. In Thyatira, they had the temple of Baal. They also worshipped the other gods of the Greeks. There were all kinds of evil, sexual, licentious, vile things going on in these temples, and they were part of being in the union. If you wanted to work and eat and support your family, you had to be a member of a union, and the union did all these perverted, wicked things. So it was inconsistent with your Christian conviction of walking in holiness. But what happened was many Christians were following suit with these pagan unions and going to these pagan temples. They were involved in rites and rituals that were displeasing to God.

Before we go on with the text, I want to put it in context historically and prophetically. Historically, this church period was in the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages. It was from about the fifth to the fourteenth century. It was almost a 1,000-year period of the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages. Some have called the Dark Ages "the devil's millennium." It was a very dark period in human history.

In 1229, under the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, they had the Council of Valencia. At this council, they placed the Bible on the index of forbidden books. I believe the reason for the Dark Ages was this very reason: they forbade the Bible to be in the hands of the lay people and the average person in the pew. The only Bible reading and interpretation was done by the priests in the Roman Catholic Church. They carried that on for many years, downplaying the need for the lay people to read or interpret the Bible for themselves. It was for the priests and leadership alone. This was why we had the Dark Ages.

I cannot tell you how stirred I get when I contemplate this very subject. I've been a Bible teacher for over 40 years, and nothing stirs my heart more than the need of our culture and the world to hear and know God's Word.

The whole reason this very dark period in man's history occurred was because the Bible was taken away. Without the Bible, we can't know God, and without God, there is no hope.

George Washington said that "It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible." I believe that.

I believe that the darkness and the problems we see in our culture today are the direct result of the lack of influence of God in our nation. We need men and women who believe in the Bible, who live by the Bible, who preach the Bible. We need pastors to preach the Bible. We need churches that are Bible centered and Bible focused. Without the Word of God, there is no life. God's Word is the revelation of God Himself. Without God's Word, we have no fixed point; we're on a sea of moral relativism, and we don't know right from wrong. So that's the whole reason for the breakdown in our culture today.

I attribute it back not to society but to the church that is responsible to preach the Word, to live the Word and to proclaim the Word. When liberalism crept into the church and we denied God's Word and it affected our culture, we have what we have today. We reaped what we have sown. So we need to get back to the Bible. If you want a revival, you need a "reBible."

At the end of this period in Thyatira, we have the Protestant Reformation. It was the greatest revival in history. At the center of the Protestant Reformation, the Bible was brought back. I think of my hero, John Wycliffe, the morning star of the Reformation. He was a Catholic priest, a scholar in Oxford, England and he translated the Bible into English, which had been forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church. He gave it to the people to read, and he preached it from his pulpit. It started a spark and then a flame which spread all over the world, called the Protestant Reformation. Then the movement went to John Huss and Martin Luther and the rest of the Protestant reformers who brought back the Bible to the people.

So we are looking at Thyatira during this period of church history, the period that was very dark when the Bible was taken away from God's people.

Now notice the description of Christ, needed for this corrupt church, verse 18. "...write these things," says the Son of God, 'who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass.'" Just what Thyatira needed was an understanding of who Jesus Christ is.

There are three descriptive terms in verse 18 that all focus on the deity of Christ. First of all, note that He is "the Son of God." This is the first and only time this title is used in the book of Revelation. That is interesting. It is commonly used in the Gospels, but in Revelation, it is the first time that Jesus is called "the Son of God." It speaks of His deity. In chapter 1, verse 13, the description of Christ is that He is "the Son of Man." Jesus is both "the Son of Man" and "the Son of God." Jesus was fully man and fully God in one Person. He is the God-man.

Why was it significant that Jesus Christ reveal Himself to this church as "the Son of God"? Truthfully, during the Middle or Dark Ages, the Roman Catholic Church shifted the focus from Jesus, the Son of God, to Mary, the mother of God. So Jesus is reminding the church at

Thyatira that He is the Son of God.

They also focused on prayers to the saints and prayers to Mary, which are not taught in the Scriptures. The Bible says, "There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus." You can't get to Jesus through Mary. You can't get to God through the saints. Jesus Christ is our high priest; He's the only one who brings us access into the presence of God. And to think I can go directly into the presence of God to the Person of Jesus Christ, His Son, our heavenly high priest!

So He is declared to be "the Son of God."

The second descriptive term of Jesus is that He "has eyes like a flame of fire," verse 18. This also speaks of His deity and that He is omniscient; He sees and knows all things. It is taken from chapter 1, verse 14, where it says, "His eyes [are] like a flame of fire."

Think about when Jesus was on the earth in His body of humiliation, yet He was fully divine. Can you imagine having Jesus look at you? Whoa! How penetrating those eyes must have been.

Remember when Peter denied the Lord three times? "I don't know Him! I don't know Him!! I don't know Him!!!" He cursed and he swore, and then Jesus was being taken out of the courtyard of Caiaphas. Jesus made eye contact with Peter. Can you imagine that moment? He had just said, "I don't know Him!" and he was cursing, and then Peter looked up and Jesus looked him right in the eye. He was so busted! Imagine the penetration of His eyes! Jesus said, "Peter, I know." To think that He sees and knows all. Then afterward Peter is forgiven and restored, in John 21. But again he has an episode with Jesus on the shores of the lake of Galilee. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me?"

"Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."

Jesus asked again, "Do you love Me?"

"Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."

Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love Me?"

So Peter answered, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Peter knew by now that God knows everything. Psalm 139:1-3, 17-18 says, "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways....How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand."

God knows you and understands you. You can't hide from God. You can fool your husband. You can fool your wife. You can fool your kids. You can fool your pastor. But you can't fool

God. He sees and He knows. So He is the one who knows our hearts. In the book of Acts, He's called "God, who knows the heart."

Is your heart right with God? Are you honest before God? His "eyes are like a flame of fire."

Thirdly, we see that His feet [are] like fine brass." This is taken from chapter 1, verse 15. "His feet were like fine brass." Jesus is the one who will judge us. Brass is the metal of judgment. In the Tabernacle in the Old Testament, there was the altar of brass, where the sacrifice was slain. And when Moses was commanded to take a serpent, he made it out of brass, put it on a pole and it was a picture of God's judgment on sin and Satan, the serpent of brass.

So when Jesus Christ comes back in His Second Coming, He's coming back with all-knowing eyes—with eyes like a flame of fire—and feet like polished brass. He's the judge of all the earth, meaning that He's God. He's the judge of the church and of all mankind, which will take place when He comes back in His Second Coming in His glory.

Now we move from the description and the destination to the commendation, verse 19. "I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first."

This church, though corrupt in idolatry and sexual immorality, had these good things and good qualities going for them. They were a loving church. It's possible to be loving but not living in holiness. It's possible to be loving and not be orthodox. The church at Ephesus had left their first love. The church at Thyatira was a loving church. That was a mark of the true church.

Secondly, they were serving. Their service was born out of love.

Thirdly, they had faith. This word "faith" had the idea of "faithfulness." "Faith" in the Bible, when preceded by "the," means the doctrine of truth that we believe. But just the word "faith" refers to a subjective faith or your trust in God. So they were a group of believers who were faithful to and trusting in God.

Fourthly, we see their patience. They were persevering. The word "patience" means "to abide under pressure."

The fifth quality was their progress. "The last are more than the first." That means that they were growing and developing.

So these are the things that the Lord commends about this church. We want to have these things in our church, as well: loving; serving, which is born out of love—if you love the Lord, you serve the Lord; being faithful to the Lord; persevering or abiding under pressure; and progressing. You should always be growing in your walk with the Lord. You should never be stagnant, reach a plateau, or backslide. You should always be growing deeper in your knowledge of God.

Of these five, three involve faith, hope and love. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says the greatest of them all is love. Love and faith or faithfulness are in verse 19. Patience speaks of hope, that you're persevering and patiently looking for the Lord's return. During the whole time you're waiting, you're growing and developing.

Though all these qualities are to be commended—and they should be found in every, individual believer and in every church—sadly there were some problems in this church in Thyatira.

As an aside, in Matthew 13, we have a series of seven parables known as “the kingdom parables.” They are parables that describe what will be going on during the church age, which is the period from the day of Pentecost, the birth of the church in Acts 2, until the rapture of the church. We are in that period right now. These parables describe the kingdom of God.

One of these parables is the parable of the tares. This introduces us to the fourth section of our text, the condemnation. The parable is a story about a man who planted a field of wheat. At night, an enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat. The tares were believed to be a weed called “darnel.” When it grows, it looks just like wheat. The servants discovered it and went to their master and asked, “What do you want us to do about it? Should we pull out the tares?”

The master said, “No; if you do that, you'll damage the wheat. Just let them both grow together. At harvest, we'll separate the wheat from the tares.” The wheat and the tares are hard to distinguish from one another. But at the end, when the Lord comes, He will separate the wheat from the tares.

In this next section, the condemnation, in the church at Thyatira, we see tares among the wheat. We see the professing church in contrast to the possessing church, the real, true believers. Note the condemnation in verses 20-23. “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...”—the word is “porneia”—“...and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. 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.”

This is a very challenging section of this letter to the church at Thyatira. We have the introduction of a woman by the name of Jezebel. She was the very wicked wife of Ahab, the king of Israel, which was the northern kingdom, in the Old Testament. She was the daughter of the pagan king of Zidon. She introduced Baal worship to Israel, and she put God's true prophets to death. She tried to kill the true prophet of God, Elijah.

The question is, was there an actual woman in the church at Thyatira by the name of Jezebel? That's possible. But most Bible scholars believe—and it's a good possibility—that there wasn't

a woman by the name of Jezebel in that church; they had a woman who was a false teacher who introduced idolatry and immorality into the church. This woman was given this title because the name Jezebel is synonymous with wicked, sinful women.

You don't want to name your daughter Jezebel. That would be on the par with naming your newly born son Judas. It is actually a beautiful name, by the way. It comes from "Judah," which means "praise." And even "Jezebel" was an actual name, which means "purity." I don't know how she got that name, because she was a very wicked woman; she is synonymous with wickedness. When you think of a Jezebel, you think of an immoral, wicked, sinful woman. So this person no doubt was a woman, but she was labeled as a Jezebel of the Old Testament, who had introduced Baal worship and idolatry.

Now Baal was the god of fertility. In the temples of Baal, they had sacred prostitutes, both male and female. So you can imagine what went on in those kinds of environments. Baal worship was very common in the Old Testament, introduced by this wicked woman Jezebel.

But in the church at Thyatira, it indicates that there was a false teacher, who was a woman, introducing idolatry and sexual immorality, maybe condoning involvement with some of the unions or guilds.

I want you to note these four things about her in verse 20. She "calls herself a prophetess." That's okay for a woman to prophecy; the Bible speaks of that. But she is a self-appointed, false prophetess in this time. It also said that she was teaching.

A very popular trend in the church today—and it goes back to Thyatira—is to have women preachers and pastors. I don't believe—and am convinced by Scripture—that a woman can hold the office of a pastor. In the Bible, the words "pastor," "elder" and the word "overseer" are all in the masculine, not in the feminine. In 1 Timothy 2:12-14, it says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression."

So it's not about the fact she is a woman; it's about the fact of creation and the fact of the Fall. God is saying that the pastoral position in the church is to be held by a man. Yet we have churches today that are ordaining or giving titles of pastor to women or the pastor's wife.

My wife is not Pastor Kristy. She is the pastor's wife, but she's not the pastor. If I can't be in the pulpit to preach, one of our pastors will be in the pulpit to preach. Not my wife. She wouldn't preach if I wanted her to. The Bible forbids that. But it has become so popular and common—having women preachers. But it doesn't mean that a woman preacher is not doctrinal or Biblical, other than the fact that that position should not be held by a woman in the church.

So this Jezebel was a prophetess, she was teaching in the church—they were allowing her to teach—and worst of all, she was seducing or misleading God's servants. It doesn't matter if it is a man or a woman. You don't want a false prophet in the pulpit. You don't want people being misled or being seduced.

Fourthly, she was teaching sexual immorality and idolatry. Both actual, sexual immorality and spiritual immorality, because they were making other things idols before God.

In Matthew 13:33, in the kingdom parables, there is another parable known as “the leaven in the meal or the bread.” It is the fourth kingdom parable in that chapter. Thyatira is the fourth church. In this parable is a woman. A woman takes leaven and hides it in the meal. The leaven permeates the whole meal, and it is corrupted. I believe that is coinciding with the church in Thyatira. This woman, Jezebel, has infiltrated the church with her false doctrine and permeated the church with idolatry and sexual immorality.

Note in verse 21 of our text that God said, “I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent.” “Repent” in the Greek is “metanoieó,” which means “to change your mind” or “to turn around” and come back to God. She didn’t repent of her sexual immorality. God, in His love, mercy, grace and patience, gave her time to repent. God is so longsuffering. God is so patient. God is so kind. This false teacher was given opportunity to repent, but she didn’t want to repent.

What didn’t she repent of? Her fornication, in the King James version, or it’s the Greek word “porneia.” We get our word “pornographic” from it. It’s a general Greek word used for sexual immorality.

We live in a culture today where we don’t even think that exists. Everything goes. You can do whatever you want. There’s nothing sexually immoral. The idea of sin is taboo itself.

What is porneia? What is sexual immorality? It is any sexual relationship outside of the covenant relationship of marriage between a man and a woman. Marriage is a divine institution. I believe in the sanctity of marriage. Marriage is between one man and one woman bound together for life in the eyes of God. Sex before marriage is porneia. Sex outside of marriage is porneia. Homosexuality is porneia. Any sex outside the covenant relationship of one man and one woman in marriage is sexual immorality.

Perhaps you are struggling with pornography. God says that He gives you time to repent. Maybe God is using this message today to speak to your own heart. You think nobody knows. God knows. You think nobody sees. God sees; you can’t hide it from God. And God gives you time to repent, time to get right with Him.

There are some dangers here that I want to mention that are so important. There is the danger of not adhering to God’s Word. There is the danger of idolatry, anything that takes the place of God. Any time you change God into what you think God is rather than what He has revealed Himself to be in the truth of His Word, you’ve just made an idol. Your idol can become your job, your sport, your own body, your passions, your possessions, your children, your wife, your husband—anything can become a god. Then there is the danger of sexual immorality. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.”

God had given this Jezebel space to repent, verse 21, “but she does not want to,” is how that verse literally would read.

As a result, this is God’s judgment, in verses 22-23: “Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed.” It’s interesting that she introduced sexual immorality, so God says, “Okay; I’m going to throw you back in the bed. That’s what you want? That’s what you get.” There’s nothing worse than God letting us follow our own sinful, lustful desires, which will be destructive. Continuing, “...and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds.” So the false church in Thyatira will go into the tribulation unless they repent and get right with God. Verse 23, “I will kill her children...”—those are her followers who have bought into her false teaching and immorality—“...with death...”—this is spiritual death, separation from God, the second death in the lake of fire or hell—“...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.” So this is a very stern warning of His judgment to this church at Thyatira. It had apostatized.

Now fifthly, in verses 24-25, we have the exhortation. “Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine...”—or those who haven’t followed the doctrine of this wicked woman—“...who have not known the depths of Satan...”—it’s interesting the depth of Satan in this church—“...as they say, I will put...”—here’s the promise—“...on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come.”

So He’s basically telling the true believers to be faithful, “hold fast...till I come.” That’s a reference to the rapture. This is the first mention of the rapture in the letters to the seven churches. Jesus Christ is coming back for the church. But until He comes, we are to “hold fast.”

Jude 3 says, “Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” Don’t compromise. The darker the world gets around us, the more we need to hold fast to God’s Word, which is true.

Then sixthly, Jesus closes with the promise, verses 26-29. “And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—‘He shall rule them...’—or “shepherd them” or “oversee 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; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

There are two promises here, and they are awesome. The first is the promise in verses 26-27: “I will give power over the nations.” This is a reference to when Christ comes back, with the church, victoriously, and He will reign on earth for 1,000 years. That’s why we call it “the millennium,” “the kingdom age” or “the Davidic kingdom.” We will co-reign with Christ. That’s what He means when He says, “He shall rule them with a rod of iron.” At the end of verse 27, Jesus is quoting from Psalm 2:8-9. Verse 9 says, “You shall break them with a rod of iron; you shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.” This verse is prophetic of the church reigning with Christ during the millennial reign.

We, as Christians, who are overcomers, will reign with Christ. I can dig it! That's awesome! We're going to reign with Christ. If someone gets out of line, with a rod of iron, they'll be struck, and like a vessel, will be shattered. If you take an iron rod and hit a piece of pottery, it shatters.

Boy, do we need a little more law and order in this world today!

Guess who's on the throne? Jesus. And He doesn't mess around. And we're going to be reigning with Him. That's the future of the true church.

The second promise is good, too. "I will give him the morning star," verses 28-29. What is "the morning star"? In Revelation 22:16, Jesus says, "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star."

I'm not an early riser. My wife gets up earlier than I do. But I get up early occasionally. Have you ever looked to the east before the sun comes up and noticed that bright, shining star? When all the other stars have gone, there is only one star still shining in the east, right over the horizon, before the sun comes up. That's called "the morning star."

The morning star is the planet Venus. There are only three objects in the solar system that you can see during the daylight hours. They are the brightest that you can see: the sun, the moon and Venus. Seeing the moon during the day is awesome! Obviously we can see the sun during the day. It is said that you can also see Venus during the day. I haven't seen it, but I'll be looking for it. If you know where to look in the day sky, Venus is a little, white dot. Then the next time you see Venus is when the sun goes down in the west. As the sun sets in the west, there is one, last twinkle in the sky. That's Venus shining bright. That's a representation of Jesus Christ. He's "the Bright and Morning Star."

In my search of information on the morning star, I discovered that ancient sailors used the planet Venus to navigate by. Can you imagine being out on the sea at night in the darkness, and before the sun comes up, you see the Bright and Morning Star? Then you know the star is exactly due east. You would navigate by that star.

How lovely to think that Jesus guides us through the darkest night. When life gets dark, when you're on a sea of darkness, and you don't know where to go, you can go to the Bright and Morning Star and follow His guidance.

A second thing about the Bright and Morning Star is that it also is used to remind us that we have hope; a new day is dawning. When you get up in the morning and the sun has not yet come up, and you see the morning star, that means it's almost daylight. That is an indication that day is coming. So Jesus is our Bright and Morning Star. A new day is coming; He's going to bring in the kingdom age.

The third thing it indicates is the joy that it brings. When you see that Bright and Morning Star, it fills your heart with joy. Why? Because of its beauty. And when you look at Jesus Christ, you see His beauty. His beauty fills your heart with joy and thankfulness. Jesus Christ is the Bright

and Morning Star.

What does it mean? It means that we will reign with Jesus, and it means that we will shine with Jesus. We will partake of His glory and of His majesty.

This is for who? The overcomers. And who are the overcomers? Those who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Those who put their trust in Him and are born again of His Spirit.

Have you trusted Jesus Christ? Will you reign with Him? Will you shine with Him?