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What the Spirit is Saying to the Churches:
Morality Matters
Revelation 2:18-29

Well, after a two-week hiatus for Homecoming and a baptism and communion service, we're returning this morning to our journey through the risen Lord Jesus' letters to the seven churches in the ancient province of Asia.

So far, we've heard how he Jesus commended the church at Ephesus for its orthodoxy and faithfulness, but called its members to repent for having abandoned the love they had at first.

We've heard him commend the church at Smyrna for its faithfulness in the face of poverty and persecution, assuring its members that they had no need to fear death, since those who are faithful to the point of death will receive the crown of life.

And we've heard Jesus commend the church at Pergamum for holding fast to his name and not denying his faith, even when one of their members, Antipas, was martyred. But he also told them, "But I have a few things against you . . ." (Revelation 2:14, RSV),¹ and called them to repent for allowing those who held to the teachings of the Nicolaitans to lead some of the members into idolatry and immorality.

Now we come to the fourth of these letters, this one directed specifically to the church at Thyatira. It's the longest of the seven letters, and addresses some of the same issues that the first three letters addressed. Listen to what the risen Lord says through his servant John . . .

⁸ "To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

²⁰ Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²² So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. ²³ I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. ²⁴ Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): ²⁵ Only hold on to what you have until I come.

²⁶ To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations--

²⁷ 'He will rule them with an iron scepter;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery'—

just as I have received authority from my Father. ²⁸ I will also give him the morning star. ²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The church at Thyatira²

Thyatira was located about 45 miles southeast of Pergamum. Besides the list of the seven churches in Revelation 1:11 and this text, the only other place Thyatira is mentioned in the New Testament is in Acts 16:14, where we're told that Lydia, who was at that time in Philippi, was "a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira." Lydia was part of a group of women in Philippi that was made up of Jews and God-fearers who gathered by the river on the Sabbath to worship and pray—apparently because there were not enough Jewish men to establish a synagogue in the city. Luke tells us in Acts that Lydia listened as Paul spoke to these women about Christ, and that "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." She and the members of her household were baptized, and she offered hospitality to Paul and his missionary associates while they were in Philippi.

We don't know how the church at Thyatira was established. It may have been that Lydia went back home and shared the gospel and was God's instrument to plant a church in her hometown. Luke tells us in Acts 19:10 that during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." So it could have been that someone else from Thyatira was converted in Ephesus and carried the gospel back home, or it could have been that one of Paul's missionary associates went and preached there and established the church. Or it could have been established by someone else at a later time. We simply don't know.

What we do know is that by the time John wrote Revelation in the mid-90s of the first century, there was a church in Thyatira that had been there for a while.

Now the city of Thyatira was a bit different from Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum. While those were the leading cities of the province of Asia as far as commerce, wealth, and politics, Thyatira wasn't nearly as prominent. The worship of both the emperor and the goddess Roma was prevalent in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum, along with the other Greco-Roman gods and goddesses. But what you had in Thyatira was a city whose economy was built on the various trades, and whose religions were centered on the patron gods and goddesses associated with these trades.

The merchants and craftsmen in these trades associated in trade guilds—organizations that brought them together for the benefit of their particular trade. These were business associations, but they were more. Archeologists have discovered many inscriptions that identified or described these guilds. Woolworkers, linen workers, dyers, makers of outer garments, tanners, leatherworkers, potters, bakers, slave dealers, bronze smiths—these all organized themselves into guilds for their respective trades. Thyatira was especially known for its production of a purple dye. (Remember that Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth.)

Now if these guilds had simply been business organizations, they would not have presented a problem for the church in Thyatira. But they weren't. They involved religion as well.

You see, their meetings were often held in the pagan temple or shrine to the god or goddess associated with their particular trade. At these meetings, along with discussing business matters, they would also offer a sacrifice to their god or goddess, then have a banquet using some of the meat from the animal that had been sacrificed. These common meals would often lead to a time of unbridled debauchery and licentiousness characterized by all kinds of immoral activity.

So here was the dilemma for the Christians in Thyatira. It was nearly impossible for someone to participate in trade and industry in Thyatira without being a member of the trade guild. So what were the Christians to do? They had to make a living. But participation in the guild meetings would mean being unfaithfulness to Christ.

The letter from Jesus

Jesus began his letter to them by identifying himself as the one who has eyes “like blazing fire” and feet “like burnished bronze” (2:18). This reference to his eyes and feet may point to his anger and his ability to discern and deal with those who are being unfaithful.

He went on to tell them that he knew their works, their “love and faith and service and patient endurance” (2:19, RSV), and that they were doing more than they were at first. In other words, they were growing spiritually.

So he began with a wonderful commendation. So far, so good. But you hear the “but” coming, don’t you?

“But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess . . .” (2:20, RSV).

You remember Jezebel in the Old Testament, don’t you—King Ahab’s wife, the one who worked so hard to turn the northern kingdom of Israel away from the LORD to worship and serve Baal? She had hundreds of the prophets of the LORD executed, and wanted to execute Elijah, but the LORD protected him.

This woman in Thyatira called herself a *prophetess*. The risen Lord Jesus called her *Jezebel*. The problem was not that she was a prophetess. Deborah and Huldah were prophetesses in the Old Testament, and Anna as well as the four daughters of Philip were in the New Testament. The problem was that she was a *false* prophet, a *Jezebel*!

She was teaching and misleading the servants of Jesus (literally, his *slaves*) “to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (2:20, NRSV). The word the KJV and the NRSV translate as “fornication” is a word that covers any kind of sexual immorality—any abuse or misuse of the good gift that God gave to be enjoyed between a man and woman who are committed to each other for life in the holy bonds of the covenant of marriage. Eating food sacrificed to idols in this context meant participating in the common meals of the guilds.

Jezebel’s teaching was similar to that of the Nicolaitans that Jesus had already condemned in his letters to the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum. In Thyatira, Jezebel’s teaching may have particularly had an economic motivation behind it—saying that in order to be able to do business and make a living, it was okay for Christians to participate in these activities. There may even have been some strains of an early form of the heresy of Gnosticism, teaching followers of Jesus that since idols aren’t real, participating in their ritual meals really wasn’t a problem, since you know the gods they represent don’t actually exist, and that participating in immoral activity was really a way to show that the spirit of the Christian is actually above all that and unaffected by the deeds of the body.

And to all this, Jesus responded with an emphatic “***NO!***”

In fact, he *pronounced judgment* on Jezebel, saying that he had already warned her, and that now since she would not repent, he would strike her with sickness and would punish those who were committing adultery with her, even to the point of striking her children (*i.e.*, her followers) dead (2:22-23). The purpose of this severe punishment would be to show all the churches that he is the one who searches hearts and minds and that he will repay each one according to his or her deeds.

To those in Thyatira who didn't accept her teaching, Jesus promised not to lay any other burden on them; they were to hold on to what they had until he comes. The phrase about not laying on them any other burden reminds us of the decree of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, which determined that no other burden was to be laid on the Gentiles who trusted Christ than "to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:29).

Jesus promised that he would give authority over the nations to the one who overcomes, just as he has received such authority from his Father. He would also give the overcomer the morning star. What Jesus was talking about here is sharing in his kingdom rule. He drew on Psalm 2 to talk about sharing in his reign. And in ancient Rome, the morning star (the planet Venus) was the sign of victory and sovereignty.

So Jesus condemned the teaching and activity of Jezebel and called the church in Thyatira to faithfulness.

And then he said, "Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:29).³

The church at Jonesboro Heights

So what is the Spirit saying to the churches?

For followers of Jesus, morality matters!

Now morality doesn't earn a right relationship with God. But throughout the Bible, God's people were called to a different lifestyle, and invited judgment on themselves when they assimilated to the ways of the world around them. The same is true for us as God's people today. Living right is to be the natural outgrowth of being in a right relationship with God through Christ.

Jesus made it clear to his disciples that this present evil age we live in is no friend to faith. He said that we are to be in the world but not of the world. Paul warned time and time again against all kinds of greed and idolatry and immorality. Followers of Jesus are to be like him, not the world around us! We're to be *counter-cultural* in the best sense of the word.

Somehow or another, people—even people who claim to be Christian—seem to have gotten the idea that God's commandments are designed to hold us back from a full and meaningful life. It's just the opposite! It's only through faith in Christ and his living his faithfulness out through us in a life like God intended that we find a truly full and meaningful life. His commandments are for our good (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)!

Look at the world around us! How many broken hearts and lives and homes could have been prevented by doing things God's way? How much less would certain diseases have spread if people would do things God's way? How many less murders and attacks and abortions and divorces would there be if people would simply do things God's way?

The thing that's so disturbing is that so many times it's people who profess to be followers of Jesus who engage in the idolatry and immorality that lead to these things. And Jesus says that to practice these things is to invite judgment on ourselves.

What's even more disturbing is that some churches and church leaders have become like Jezebel, not only condoning but sometimes even urging behavior that Scripture clearly indicates is contrary to God's will. Sometimes it's about issues of sexual morality, sometimes it's about matters that Scripture calls idolatry, and sometimes it's about other ethical matters like greed or prejudice or racism.

Can't they hear what Jesus says in these letters to the churches? Can't *we* hear it?

You see, practicing idolatry and immorality are really the symptoms of a much deeper deviation—*spiritual adultery* against the Lord Jesus Christ, who has taken his church to be his bride for all eternity. He calls us to be faithful to him, no matter what. Assimilating to the standards of the culture around us is nothing less than infidelity to Christ. When we're not faithful ethically, we're simply not faithful to Christ.

For followers of Jesus, *morality matters!*

“Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: Morris Ashcraft, “Revelation” in *the Broadman Bible Commentary*; David Aune, “Revelation” in *The Word Biblical Commentary*; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Book of Revelation*; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*; Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*.

³ My translation.