

Thyatira: Toiling and Tolerating Revelation 2:18-29

Pastor Tim Nixon

Dear Loved One,

Greetings in the Name of our Lord whose resurrection has brought us life. I write to tell you what a struggle we are facing here in our little town. As you know, we are small and insignificant. We are not a trading center but have a large military garrison here. But for most of us, this is a union town. We call them guilds. We are what you call, a blue-collar town.

For us this has become a significant challenge in our faith. The guilds, or the unions, control all employment. You cannot even own a business here that produces a good if you do not belong to that guild. Each guild has its patron god. To belong to the guild, we are supposed to go to the parties and activities that are sanctioned by our guild to honor its patron idol. After these celebrations and parties, we are expected to participate in the revelry and the immorality. Prostitutes are usually available.

Now, we have understood the faith, to require us to not identify ourselves with idols by eating and partying at their feasts and we must not commit sexual sin. Now, it is more than just we don't get promoted, or we don't get raises or we face harassment. We are not just the butt of jokes or whispers. We can't work! I refused to attend since coming to faith and now I have no work.

Many of my friends, who think that the guilds (or the unions) are useful and necessary but who disagree with its philosophy (idolatry) or its practice (immorality) are going along with it in order not to lose their jobs. Now, in our own assembly (which you know is small and struggling, but, praise God, seems to be faithful), there is a woman, claiming to be a spokesperson for God telling us that, in order to reach our neighbors in their guilds, we need to stay in them and experience what they are experiencing so that we can communicate the Good News to them. The elders are putting up with her. They confronted her and she changed her mind about the idolatry, but not the immorality.

Please pray for us as we are trying to think through this. Must close now. We are meeting this evening to hear the letter going around from the Apostle John. May Jesus find your faith working in love.

Thyatira, Asia

John writes the longest letter in Revelation to the smallest church. This small church faced the dilemma common to believers in all times in all places: *how tolerant are Christians to be?*

The Character of Christ (v.18)

Again and again the church is confronted by Christ. He speaks to His church out of His character, His nature. Here is what He has to say. Here is Who He is. The effect on us ought to be: *listen*. So Christ is revealed:

In His Person

Son of God

This church is confronted by *the Son of God*. Before and to all the others, Christ has been *the one who*. But in this letter, he is being referred to as the Son of God. It is His elevated position as a reigning and divine King that He comes into His church.

In His Description

eyes of fire/ feet of bronze

This is quite a frightening aspect. Jesus comes as the Son of God with flaming eyes and bronzed feet. Why? Why use this language? Simply to show us that Christ moves among His church and speaks to His church in discernment and in judgment. His gaze burns through the facades we put

up and He will deal with what He finds. His eyes act like a divine laser. Nothing is hidden from his gaze.

The imagery here is meant to evoke pictures of hot furnaces in which molten bronze is forged. In these powerful ovens, the impurities are burned off. Bronze almost always speaks of judgment. Jesus bronze feet will stomp out sin. Against those who have infiltrated the church with their error, the Lord turns the brightness of His holiness and truth. And there is no place to turn.

It reminds us of Revelation 19:15, "From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty." It's a frightening thing to see Jesus Christ coming toward His church in this way.

The Commendation of the Church (v.19)

And as if we didn't already get it from Christ's flaming eyes, he opens here with, "I know your works..." I know your efforts, your deeds. I know what you do.

If Jesus wrote a letter about Clearcreek Chapel, I don't know what he might say about us, but I do know he could very well begin with, "I know your works. I know everything you do."

The Serving of the Church

Jesus then commends them for five things. The words here show us a church whose faith has matured through loving ministry.

- **Dutiful Church** - The Lord speaks of their *work*. They were working hard at all that was their duty.
- **Devoted Church** - They were a church whose *love* for God and neighbor motivated their labor.
- **Doctrinal Church** - Jesus acknowledged their *faith*. They held true to body of truth given them by the Scripture. It was not something just acknowledged, but actually believed.
- **Dedicated Church** - It was a church who knew what *servicing* meant. They ministered much. They were genuinely available to meet one another's needs.
- **Diligent Church** - Jesus knows that they are a church that was *steadfast*. They patiently endured. They persevered. They were not daunted from the task nor swayed from the path. When the going got tough – they preserved. When decisions didn't go their way, or their personal opinions differed, or they wanted something different from what they had - they simply pressed on.

This church is marked, not by mere religious activity, but by real, informed, caring and long-term sacrificial ministry.

The Progressing of the Church

This church was not in decline. It may have been small and insignificant. It may have been serving a small community. It may have lost members due to persecution. But this church was continuing to expand its ministry and develop its serving. It was a church whose present level of serving was greater than ever before.

The Charge against the Church (v.20-23)

But the Lord has something against the church. She may be toiling by love and in doctrine, ministry and not only enduring but actually progressing, but they are tolerating a great problem.

The Designated Problem (v.20)

The church at Thyatira was tolerating error: error in doctrine and duty being spread by a woman who usurped the role of an elder and then taught the people a rationale to justify sin.

We do not know who this woman was. We do know that John reached back into the history of Israel, and compared her to that Gentile queen of evil King Ahab who had persecuted God's prophets and promoted the typically sexually unrestrained worship of Baal

What Jezebel did in Israel was being done in the church. A woman, claiming the credentials and authority of a prophet, was teaching the church how to compromise with the cultural idols and immorality in order to keep their places in society. She had so infected the church with her doctrine of toleration, that the church in turn tolerated her.

Tolerance has become a significant challenge for us today. Our world will call us intolerant when we declare that what we believe is not only true but is **the** truth. We have a culture that effectively says that there are absolutely no absolutes. The assertion that we *must be tolerant* is itself intolerant.

We are being pressured to see our Biblical worldview as simply one among many others, our doctrine one among many others in Christianity. Tolerance like this will eventually destroy the doctrinal heart of the body of Christ.

This letter shows the depth of sin that compromise ultimately leads to – full-scale idolatry, full-scale immorality, and worst of all, tolerance of both. This is the church that has been infiltrated by the world. This is the church that tolerated sin, the church that absorbed sin, absorbed error and lived happily ever after with it. This is the kind of church that is common today, as it has been through all of the centuries, but completely inconsistent with the demands of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the head of the church.

The first instruction of Jesus to the church is in Matthew 18. If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private. If he listens to you, you've won your brother. If he doesn't listen, take one or two more with you so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax gatherer.

In other words, the very first instruction ever given to the church is to confront sin. And that instruction is given to individuals in the church. But if your brother sins you go and you reprove him. The Lord wants His church to be pure. He wants it to be intolerant of sin. God's people must not tolerate error and evil.

The Delaying Patience (v.21)

The Lord gave her time to repent. He was patient with her. But His patience with her was not to be construed as tolerance. It seems that having been confronted with her evils, this woman renounced her idolatry but clung to her immorality. What God demanded was total and complete repentance. But her sinful stubbornness showed what she really wanted.

The Lord's patience with us can either bring about a full repentance or it will expose our hard heartedness. While waiting for us to change, it is our own unwillingness that is exposed by it. God's patience often exposes hardness of our hearts.

The Dire Punishment (v.22-23a)

The Lord waited, now He moves to deal with the problem. Note how extensive the uprooting of this evil is. Her teaching had *corrupted* the church and had *condemned* herself.

He moves against the false prophetess. Her bed of sin had now become a bed of sickness. The Lord often uses sickness to deal with His people. There were many in Corinth who were sick and many who had died because God had begun to move against their sinful deeds. We must take this to heart.

The term here *great tribulation* does not refer to the period of time just before the 2nd Coming, but to trouble brought by judgment or chastening.

He also moves against those who have sinned with her. When our hearts and minds are seduced by error, God sees this as adultery, as spiritual immorality. Great will be the trouble that God sends to such people. But there is hope and mercy. They must repent of her deeds.

This might sound harsh. But the words here are referring to the next generation of those who believe the errors spread by this false prophetess. Error poses the greatest danger to the second generation. God will not allow it to happen. He threatens to destroy those who grow up with, adopt and cannot see that this is error.

We must see how serious God is about error. If this is the way God sees it, shouldn't we see it the same way?

God will do what is necessary to maintain the purity of His people.

The Designed Purpose (v.23b)

God's patience with the false prophetess revealed her hard heart. Now His judgment and chastening *speaks with great emphasis and authority to the church*. What God does is designed to cause us to understand something with great clarity.

- **God knows us** - His eyes of fire penetrate right to the most hidden motivation and uncovers them.
- **God deals with us** - His feet of bronze move in judgment and chastening to give us based on what we have done.

What we have here is **the fear of God**. When we understand that God knows us and that He will deal with us, that understanding is the fear of the Lord.

God's people need to cultivate a fear of God: a fear that motivates out of love, faithfulness in our doctrine and in our deeds.

The Correction of the Church (v.24-25)

You will notice the depth of the corruption is indicated in verse 24 by the phrase 'the deep things of Satan.' The phrase *deep things of Satan* probably refers to occult rites and secret practices within the meetings of the guilds.

It shows how the plunge had reached the depths. You remember Smyrna? The church at Smyrna was being assaulted by a synagogue of Satan. But it was coming from the outside against them. Pergamum was being confronted by the throne of Satan, the very capital city as it were of satanic religion. But Thyatira had plummeted into the deep things of Satan. And this was not something that was attacking them from the outside, this was behavior that was going on in the inside.

How merciful God is! Here is this wonderful church that has become infected with the plague of error passed on by this evil, false prophetess. But there are those who have not been seduced by the error and therefore do not believe it or hold to it. They understood the danger of deep exposure to or personal experience of the world and the occult.

Jesus says two important encouragements to those who do not hold the error and who have not investigated the deep things of Satan.

I place no other burden - Think about this. There is nothing else that Jesus lays on this church. Just stop tolerating this woman and her sin. Repent of your own involvement. That is all He is concerned with now.

Hold fast to what you have - do not lose ground. Embrace with firm commitment the doctrine and deeds that come directly from the text of Scripture. Keep on pleasing God until He comes. Keep on being dutiful, devoted, doctrinal, dedicated and diligent.

The Challenge to the Church (v.26-29)

What a wonderful challenge is given to this church. Overcomers will one day experience the rule of Christ and will share in that authority.

God has a purpose for all that transpires. Part of that purpose is that from all the people groups God will have those who believe, obey and praise the excellence and worth of Christ. These will be given the privilege to:

- **Rule with Christ** - This is the clear language from this text. We will have the privilege of exercising Jesus' Kingly authority in Kingdom.
- **Receive the fullness of Christ** - Revelation 22:16 tells us that Jesus Himself is the bright and morning star. What Jesus wants us to understand is that overcomers will be infused with the grace and fullness of Christ. What we know now in very limited amounts, will one day be our constant and complete reality.

If you have ears, hear and obey.

Sadly, this letter is written at the end of the first century. It is thought that by the end of the second century there was no church in Thyatira. It was gone, out of existence.

- The problem that faced this little church was not persecution.
- The problem wasn't the guilds and their false gods, and possibly losing your job as a Christian.
- The problem wasn't what was on the outside pressuring the church, it was what was on the inside.
- The real problem here was that they had fallen on the inside. It wasn't grievous wolves from the outside; it was perverse people from the inside.

Reflect and Respond

- We must strive with all the grace God gives us to be commended as this church was. Our desire must be to be dutiful, devoted, doctrinal, dedicated and diligent.
- We can *never* tolerate error in doctrine or duty. We must be on the alert for false teachers and teaching wherever they may be.
- We can never lose our sense of looking forward to the hope and glory and greatness of what is to come.
- We must always be listening to hear and heed the Spirit's voice in the Word of God.
- We must always make sure these words are more than words. We must work out our salvation with fear and trembling as the Holy Spirit transforms us more and more into the image of our Savior.