
Thyatira: Toiling and Tolerating

Revelation 2:18-29

Pastor Russ Kennedy

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 that 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, and, praise God, seems to be faithful), there is a woman, claiming to be a spokesperson for God is telling us that, in order to reach out 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.

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 the Lamb find your faith working in love.

Thyatira, Asia

John writes the longest letter in Revelation to the smallest church. Nothing is known in history about this church except for what is here in the Scripture. This small church faced the dilemma common to believers in all times in all places. I can sum it up in a very simple statement: *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:

¹⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

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*. Now, this church must face the truth that what they are doing is being done under the scrutiny of 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.

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. 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.

I am reminded of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. At the end, when the children meet the lion, they ask, "Is he safe?" "No, He is not safe, but He is good. He may be gentle, but He is never a tame lion." Jesus may come to us as a suitor and our groom: but if He finds us tainted, He is not safe.

The Commendation of the Church

(v.19)

What an amazing church this was. When pastors gather at conferences, the discussion inevitably turns to their own congregations. "My church is like this ..." "Well, mine does this .. or thinks like this ..." "My church treats me like this ..." The elders at Thyatira would have high praise of their church. And this praise comes from the living, seeing, knowing and discerning Christ.

¹⁹ "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

The Serving of the Church

The words here show us a church whose faith has matured through loving ministry.

Dutiful Church - The Lord speaks of their *toil*. 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 acknowledge, 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 persevered. They were not daunted from the task nor swayed from the path. 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. But this church was continuing to expand its ministry and to develop its serving. It was a church whose present level of serving was greater than ever before. They were not like Ephesus whose labor grew while their love waned. Thyatira's labor and love were growing all along.

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.

²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. ²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sick-bed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, ²³ and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

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 evil and brought forward the name of the loathsome toad who squatted in horrid evil on the throne of Israel. Jezebel married Ahab the king and led him astray into idolatry. She viciously slandered and then murdered just to get Ahab a vineyard he coveted. The stench of her deeds still rises up in a foul odor from the chronicles of Israel.

What she 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.

Toleration is becoming a significant challenge for us today. Our post-modern world will call us intolerant when we declare that what we believe is not only true, but is **the** truth. Pluralism and plurality is the only dogma that can be asserted. Once again we have a culture that effectively says that there absolutely no absolutes. Just so, the prevailing world-view says that we must tolerate all view except views who are not tolerant. Listen, loved ones, this is simply not possible. Pluralism is an utter failure: to assert that we *must be tolerant* is itself intolerant.

And we are being sucked into the morass, particularly in doctrine and to a lesser degree, in our understanding of Christian duty. We are being pressed to see our Biblical world-view as

simply one among many others, our doctrine one among many others in Christianity. Loved ones, toleration like this will eventually destroy the doctrinal heart of the body of Christ.

This points to a recurring problem in the churches. We struggle with maintaining our love for people while at the same time sustaining our discernment and our willingness to expose and expel error. This is highlighted by contrasting Ephesus and Thyatira.

Ephesus	ever increasing labor	↑ Duty & Discipline
	diligent exposure of error	↓ Devotion
	loss of love and passion for Christ	
Thyatira	ever increasing labor	↑ Duty & Devotion
	growing from informed love	↓ Discipline
	loss of discernment and discipline	

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 the His patience with her was not to be construed as toleration. It rather was used as a searchlight shining deep into the recesses of her heart to expose the hardness within. It seems that having been confronted with her evils, she 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 our hardness.

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.

Source - 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. All of you every time you fall ill must begin recovery by finding out if this has fallen on you because of the Lord's chastening of you!

Consorts - 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. Repentance is always the condition to forgiveness.

Next generation - This might sound harsh. But the words here are referring to the next generation of those who believe the errors promulgated 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 cannot help but be struck by how serious God is about error. If this is the way God sees it, should we not 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)

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.

²⁴ But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. ²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come.

They understood the danger of deep exposure to or personal experience of the world and the occult. The phrase *deep things of Satan* probably refers to occult rites and secret practices within the meetings of the guilds.

I want to say a word on this topic. The Bible basically gives us all we need to know about Satan and the demonic world around us. I believe that it is extremely dangerous to get involved in deep studies and analysis of the occult, New Age and pagan rites. These are dangerous to your spirit and detrimental to your walk with Christ. We do not need detailed and massive knowledge of these things to know that they are evil and wrong. We do not even need this detailed knowledge to guard against being infected by them. Then to add to this, we have all the modern books that do not even do primary research, but are speculation based on extremely limited Biblical data. This is particularly true of the *spiritual warfare* people and books like *This Present Darkness*. Jesus speaks to those who did not get involved in those things.

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.

²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority 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.'

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 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 heed.

Reflect and Respond

Let us strive with all the grace God gives us to be commended as this church was. Let us be dutiful, devoted, doctrinal, dedicated and diligent.

Let us *never* tolerate error in doctrine or duty. Let us be on the alert for false teachers and teaching where ever they may be.

Let us never lose our sense of looking forward to the hope and glory and greatness of what is to come.

Let us always hear and heed the Spirit's voice in the Word of God.

May these words be more than words—may we transform them into living realities.