

Jesus Speaks to His Church: “Be Holy!”

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Revelation 2:18-29, 1 Peter 1:13-16

This fall, we have been studying the letters to the seven churches of the Book of Revelation. In each of these letters, Jesus speaks to his church – not just the church then, but now. We have looked at the letters addressed to Ephesus and Smyrna. This morning we come to the city of Thyatira. A few of us happened to be in this city in Western Turkey about three weeks ago – and of course, much has changed since the first century. Few ancient remains of this city can be seen – what is still visible lies in a city park behind a hospital.

This city was not as important as the other cities we have visited thus far. It didn't have any of the natural geographical advantages that made Ephesus and Smyrna so powerful and wealthy. Thyatira was originally a military outpost that grew into a minor commercial center. It was essentially a working class city where various trade guilds played an important role. In the first century there were associations of weavers, leatherworkers, bakers, potters and bronze workers. Those of you who are bible scholars may remember that it was from Thyatira that Lydia had come. Lydia traded in materials treated with Thyatira's purple dye and is described by Luke in the Book of Acts as a “seller of purple goods.” She emigrated to the city of Philippi where she heard Paul preach the gospel and became a Christian. Perhaps it was Lydia, newborn in Christ, who returned to her home in Thyatira and was the means of planting the Christian Church there – we don't know.

Listen now, as Jesus speaks to his church (Revelation 2:18-29):

¹⁸ “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. ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Re 2:18–29). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Jesus has both good news and bad news for this church. The good news is that they have some wonderful qualities for which they are to be commended. They are a loving church. We said love was the first mark of a true Christian church – any church worth its salt must be passionate in its love for God and people. The Thyatirans are a loving bunch. That is good. Jesus also praises them for their faith, their patient endurance under pressure, and their service to others. *“I know your works”* – Jesus is saying. *“You are doing a lot of good things. Your ministry is powerful and effective. The practical expression of your love is evident to all and it has grown.”* Congratulations!

But now the bad news: *“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.”*

There was a crisis in this church. We don’t know all the details, but apparently a self-styled prophetess with a good deal of power and influence was leading many of the Christians at Thyatira morally astray. She seemed to be recommending unfaithfulness in marriage and all sorts of loose sexual behavior as well as the eating of meat offered to idols. Jesus refers to this individual or to this movement symbolically as “Jezebel” – a name that had become a byword for the worst kind of evil. Whatever you do, don’t ever name a child Jezebel!

There was a famously wicked queen of Israel in Old Testament times named Jezebel – she was the wife of gutless King Ahab. Her story is found in the Book of 1 Kings. She is described as the one who worshiped the Canaanite fertility god Baal. She introduced idol worship to Israel, erecting altars to various gods. She persecuted the prophets of the true God of Israel, murdered many of them, and spent her time chasing the prophet Elijah around the country. She was finally overthrown, killed, and her body was thrown to the dogs. The Bible makes a final comment about Jezebel and her husband King Ahab: *“There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. (1 Kings 21:25)*

Now, it seemed, the spirit of Jezebel had been reincarnated in the church at Thyatira. This woman was spreading her evil influence everywhere. Immorality was running rampant and was being tolerated by the church. The teaching seemed to be that if you had been “saved” by Christ then it didn’t really matter what you did with your body or with your life. You can worship God on Sunday but live like the devil the rest of the time. Love the Lord *but hey*, if you want to play around on the side in your personal life, if you feel the need to give in to your animal urges now and then – what is it going to hurt? It’s old the lie of Satan in the Garden of Eden – *“Did God say you shouldn’t eat of that tree? Come, now!”* Jezebel was Satan’s representative in the church at Thyatira, and she was running wild like a bull in a china shop. She had to be stopped at all costs.

So Jesus, the Lord of the Church, who sees everything, who searches hearts and minds, issues a stern warning:

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. ²

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Re 2:21–23). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

The Lord's words are shocking – and that is no doubt his intent. He wants to wake people up to the disastrous consequences of human wickedness. If you insist on following the devil, walking in the way of unrighteousness and sin, ignoring God's design for your life, you are headed for disaster.

Why does the Lord come down so hard on immorality and human sin? Why does he simply wink at sin as so many do today, saying “*Well, that just how human beings are -- everybody does it?*” Why is he so severe in this passage and so anxious to judge immoral acts? We don't like the picture of Jesus or of God as being a stern judge. We prefer Jesus meek and mild. We prefer Jesus blessing the children, not the one who makes a whip and chases moneychangers out of the temple. In our scripture passage this morning, Jesus, the Lord of the Church seems too harsh. He is too much the judge. It presents an unattractive picture of him!

The fact is, our Lord judges sin and immorality harshly because he loves us so. That may seem a contradiction, but it is true. God has built into this universe a moral law – right and wrong have been woven into the very fabric of life itself. Whenever that moral order is violated – if people lie, if they cheat, if they steal, if they commit adultery or murder, if they live selfishly without regard for others - people inevitably get hurt. And when people get hurt, it hurts God. It hurts God deeply. That's why God hates sin. God loves people too much to see them get hurt and hurt each other. Because of God's love, the grand plan for human life must judge sternly the injustice of sexual exploitation of human beings, the sins of pride, greed, anger, and every other transgression that causes such heartache and pain.

The Lord promises to judge the Jezebel running rampant in the church at Thyatira, if she doesn't *repent*.

And this is another thing we learn about God's love. Because of God's love there is always the promise of forgiveness. There is hope for sinners. There was still hope for Jezebel and her followers in Thyatira. But there needed to be repentant - turning away from selfishness and self-centeredness and sin and immorality and turning toward God and God's righteousness.

So then, here was a church that had love, faith, patient endurance, and a busy ministry; it had a lot going for it. But it seemed to lack one thing; in a word, it lacked *holiness* – that is, moral purity, righteousness of character. Many in that church seemed to lack a sense of personal morality and of daily obedience to the Lord.

Jesus speaks to this church and to every church (including our own), saying “*Be holy, as I am holy.*”

Do you want to be holy? People want to pursue happiness. But how many want to pursue “holiness?” “Being holy” seems terribly old-fashioned today. Part of our problem is that we don't understand what being holy means. We may identify holiness with saints who walk on water, or with those who have taken vows of obedience and poverty and chastity. When we think of holiness, we may think of those who seem “holier than thou” – those who are self-righteous and overly judgmental. We may equate “holiness” with a long list of prohibitions –don't smoke, don't drink, and so on...

But “holiness” biblically speaking is much more than that. Holiness is conformity to the character of God. Holiness is becoming wholly like God, thinking like God, acting as God would. To be holy is to live as God would have us live, reflecting his righteousness, his love, his justice and peace in all our relationships and in every realm of our lives.

Holiness of life, righteousness of character – is another indispensable mark of the real Christian and a true church. There must be love, there must be a willingness to suffer and to bear up under pressure, and....*there must be holiness of life.*

Listen to the Apostle Peter:

¹³ Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”³

In other words, *“Live differently. You belong to God. You are a holy people. You are called to live by different values and standards. You are called to reflect his righteousness and his character in your thoughts and in your actions. It matters profoundly how you live. Live in the light. Live morally. Live according to God’s grand design for your life. For when you do, you will find freedom and joy. And you will bring others to His light.*

The sad thing is that so many Christians and so many churches do not live differently than the world around them. They have compromised their faith and their values. The Spirit of Jezebel is let loose in the church. Such churches blend in perfectly with their surroundings. They have lost their identity. There is nothing “holy” or “set apart” about them. The church’s beliefs and its values fall to the level of the culture’s lowest common denominator. It loses its power to influence. The world stops paying attention to it.

John Bright, who wrote an important book entitled The Kingdom of God says this about the church that has lost its holiness – its “set apartness”:

God help the church that so blends into society that there is no longer any difference! Such a church will produce no quality of behavior other than that which society in general produces. It will take on the prejudices of society, and even demand that its gospel support those prejudices... And that is stark tragedy! The end of it is a poverty-stricken church which utters no Word, states no demands, summons to no destiny -- but has a host of activities you would enjoy. And such a church is not the peculiar people of God’s kingdom: it has failed to be the Church and needlessly cumpers the ground.”

Christians and Christian churches are called to be different, for they are “holy” unto the Lord. They are called to be “holy” in the sense that they are “set apart” to reflect God’s character. Such holiness does not come easily to us. It is a cooperative process between us and God. God, through his grace, makes a new relationship with him possible, but then we must cooperate with God’s Spirit to build his character in us. Christian character building comes though the practice of spiritual disciplines like bible study, prayer, worship, gathering regularly with other Christians, and giving of our time, and talent and treasure. Holiness is costly – it comes through blood, sweat and tears. It takes daily obedience. And it takes *time* – actually a *lifetime* of character building.

³ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (1 Pe 1:13–16). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

“Be holy,” says the Lord, “as I am holy.” Holiness is the one thing the church in Thyatira lacked. But there was hope for that church. They could turn from moral compromise and obey God once again. The Lord of the church had not abandoned them. He knew them through and through and he would help them to get back on the royal road of obedience once again. So he will do for us, when we stray morally and spiritually. But we have our part to play; we too must repent, and desire and practice holiness of life.

As always, Jesus ended his letter to the church at Thyatira on a hopeful note. Those who refused to give in to the Spirit of Jezebel and who pursued holiness in life were given two promises:

²⁶To 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. ⁴

He seems to be promising those who live holy lives a share of his authority and power in the life to come. We shall rule with him.

And secondly, those who pursue holiness in their lives will receive his gift of the “morning star.” In Revelation 22: 16 the Lord describes himself as being “the bright morning star.” The faithful Christian who lives by the standards of God, who refuses to compromise himself or herself morally or spiritually, will, in the end, receive more of Christ himself. They will know him more deeply, more intimately. Turning their backs on the darkness of sin, they will see the light of the glory of God in the matchless face of Jesus Christ.

“Be holy!” It matters how we live. Strive to be like Jesus!

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Re 2:26–27). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.