

The Church's Dirty Laundry

Scripture: Revelation 2:18-29

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**February 21, 2010
Evening Service**

People of God, as we go through these seven letters, it can become a discouraging enterprise. After all, when we study these churches we find them to have serious problems. The church in Thyatira is no exception. As we shall shortly discover she has a serious shortfall.

Does that surprise you? After all, these churches had just been established by the apostles like Paul and John. They were founded by eyewitnesses of the resurrected Lord. Surely this would have made them spiritually strong. Yet what we find are imperfect churches. That's the nature of the church on this side of the new earth. There is no perfect church. There never was and never will be until Christ returns.

Eugene Peterson in his commentary on the book of Revelation compares these churches to rooms. He says, "the churches of the [Book of] Revelation show us that churches are not Victorian parlors where everything is picked up and ready for guests." You know these rooms. They are filled with fine furniture. They can only be used for formal occasions. Suits and dresses must be worn in these rooms.

But the churches presented here are not like that. They are instead like "messy family rooms" where toys are scattered about, handprints are on the woodwork, and stains mar the carpet. That's what happens when people actually live and use a room.

The same is true for the church. That's because Christ does not call perfect people into the church but sinners. As long as sinners are invited to live and belong to the church, there will be stains; there will be difficulties; there will be dirty laundry that at times are hung out for the whole world to

see. While at times this can be embarrassing, while at times this tarnishes the image of the church in the world; while at times it hinders the mission of the church, it is part of the reality of being the church.

Tonight we look at the messy family room of the church in Thyatira. This city was located on a main travel route. As a result, it became a manufacturing center. In fact, Thyatira became well known for the quality of its goods. It's like today where people look at the label to see where it is made. Made in Japan suggests a better quality product than a product labeled made in China. In the NT times, made in Thyatira was an indication of good, quality products.

As a result, there were plenty of job opportunities in Thyatira. But in order to work, there was a catch. A person had to belong to guild. In some ways it was like belonging to union. But a union just organizes the workers and deals with their concerns. A guild involves everyone in a certain trade, both the workers and owners. A guild controls all aspects of the trade, from the materials to be used to the means of marketing the products. In this way it was like a marketing board. As we shall discover shortly even more was involved with these guilds--aspects that caused difficulty for Christians, leading some to compromise the gospel.

But before we get to that we must examine the positive aspects to this church. In the typical pattern of these letters, Christ begins on a positive note. He says: *I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are doing more now than before.* This verse lists a host of positive things happening in the church in Thyatira. Though you cannot tell from the NIV translation, this list begins and ends by mentioning works. I know your works--your last works are more than before. What are these works? Well, they are the four items listed in between.

Love is first of all mentioned. Here we are reminded of Christ's letter to the church in Ephesus. Christ says to that church: You have forsaken your first love. While the church of Ephesus neglected the warm, close relationship with God that was not the case in Thyatira. She loved God. The Christians expressed their love to their fellow believers. This is a very hopeful sign. The church is called upon to reflect the love of God has first shown us. Love is to be evident in every Christian community.

The second item mentioned is faith. Love and faith are closely related. Because faith is the foundation of love. Without true faith, love is meaningless. Faith is at the heart of the Christian and the church. Together, faith and love provides the motivating forces to do good works.

Service is mentioned next. Service is the result of faith and love. It is their visible expression. The word used here can also be translated as

ministry. From this word we get our word deacon. And so the type of ministry or service envisioned here is one of helping others; providing for those in need--both within and outside the community of faith. This too is an important part of the church. Reaching out with concrete acts of mercy and love.

This leaves one final work: perseverance. Now this seems out of place. How can perseverance or patience be a work? Why would this quality be important for a church to reflect? Because to fulfill the mission of the church much patience and endurance is required. Because of the challenges of the world, one must persevere. As a result, perseverance is an important quality for a church to have.

I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are doing more now than before. These are the words of praise Christ has for the church in Thyatira. But they are very short in comparison to the lengthy warning Christ gives to this church. In many ways, this warning is a repetition that was given to the other churches. It's a warning about compromising with the world. But what is unique in this warning is the focus on Jezebel. Christ says: *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.*

Jezebel. Do you know this name? It is a reference to the OT person, Jezebel, the wife of Ahab. Ahab was a wicked king who led the people of the northern kingdom of Israel down the path of disobedience from which it would never recover. Jezebel, his wife, was a major contributing force in the sins of Israel in breaking their covenant with God. Jezebel worshipped Baal and led the people of Israel in the worship of Baal. The prophet Elijah confronted Jezebel and Baal worship at Mt. Carmel. There the people of Israel were forced to choose: Do they serve Baal or the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth? They could not have it both ways.

Yet that is what the Jezebel in this letter wanted. This is not her real name. It's a symbolic name, representing what Jezebel in the OT stood for: compromise with the world. She wanted it both ways--to be able to believe in Jesus Christ as well as participate in the pagans activities all around her. Here we must understand the significance of the guilds in the city of Thyatira.

To be part of these guilds meant more than having a job. These guilds were tied with the worship of the pagan gods. The banquets were held in the temples of the false gods. The food served to eat was first sacrificed to these idols. So how could a Christian participate in these activities forbidden to

Christians?

Jezebel had an answer. She taught one could be both a good Christian and go to the pagan feasts. But how could she explain this? How could she reconcile these two contrary points of view?

I suppose one way is to argue from an economic point of view: In order for us to have a job, in order for us to provide for our families we need to belong to these guilds. To be part of the guilds means participating in these pagan feasts. There is no other way to get around it. Economics forces us to compromise. This is an enticing argument isn't it? We need to work, even if it means giving in our Christian principles.

Economics often led us to compromise. But verse 24 hints at another way. It talks about Satan's so called secrets. Implied here is that those followed Jezebel wanted to learn the secrets of Satan. Why would they want to do this? Well, there was a movement in the early church that taught that in order to defeat Satan you had to really know Satan. You had to enter into his realm and learn first hand what following Satan required. In other words, if you want to reject sin, you first of all have to experience sin. To put it another way: if you really want to experience the grace of God, go out and commit a great sin; then ask for the forgiveness of God. In this way you can experience the greatness of God's mercy. And so Jezebel could say: Go to the temple feasts. Sin boldly. God will forgive you. What joy that will bring. But what this type of reasoning is doing is trying to get the best of both worlds: both the pleasure of sin and the joy of forgiveness.

It is a type of reasoning that young people are tempted to use. When confronted with alcohol or other drugs, it is tempting to say: I won't know what I rejecting unless I try it first. Let me try once. If I get drunk or get high, I'll know how bad it is and I won't do it again. Let me sow my wild oats, then will I repent I can give a wonderful testimony of God's forgiveness.

Jesus doesn't agree with this type of thinking. Of course, the offer of forgiveness is always there for those who repent of their sins. But we're not to sin so that grace may abound. That's to make a mockery of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. That's why Christ comes with a harsh word of judgment:

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. I will strike her children dead.

These are harsh words. They do not fit the typical picture people have of Jesus. But they are a reminder that Christ will not permit his church to compromise with the enemy Satan. Christ is head of the church and he calls

her to be faithful to him.

Now throughout all of this, you might wonder how can a church who is commended for her love, faith, service, and perseverance--how can such a church be led astray by a person such as Jezebel? How can a church who in many ways is strong, how can she also be so weak when it comes to dealing with this threat to her existence?

Perhaps a contrast to the church in Ephesus would be helpful. The church in Thyatira had what the church in Ephesus lacked. They had love for Christ. But Thyatira lacked what Ephesus had: strong doctrinal and moral standards. What a church needs is a balance between the two. A church needs the warmth and practical service that Thyatira had but a church also needs the standards that Ephesus had. A balance between orthodoxy and warm spirituality. Orthodoxy without love is deadly. But warm expressions of love and service without upholding biblical standards is just as deadly. In the case of Thyatira, an openness of love without insisting in upholding the law of God led to Jezebel's compromise with the world.

Christ calls his church to grow in the works of love, faith, service, and perseverance. He calls us to produce these fruits while holding on to what we have. Holding on to what we believe concerning God, the gospel, the way of obedience. We are not called to be successful in business. We are not called to be the most influential group in society. We are called to hold on to what we have in Christ.

And what happens to those who are faithful? This is what Jesus promises: *To him who overcome and does the will of Christ to the end, I will give authority over the nations... I will also give him the morning star.* Both of these promise point to the same thing. They point to reign of Christians with Christ since the morning star symbolizes royalty.

For you see, one day the tables will be turned. Those who are persecuted for their faith; those who suffer at the present because they refuse to compromise with the world, in the end they will reign over the nations. Because believers are the winning side. Christ secured the victory on the cross. We do not have to follow the route of Jezebel in order to secure the benefits of this world. Instead, when we follow the will of Christ we will gain authority over the nations. We will reign forever with Christ. In the meantime, we are to hold fast to what we have. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*