

Letters to Seven City Churches: Letter to a Progressive Church

Revelation 2:18-29

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on June 1, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ No one can serve two masters. That's what our Lord Jesus once taught (cf. Mt. 5:24). If you try to serve two masters, he says you'll either hate one and love the other or you'll be devoted to one and despise the other.
 - ▶ **In other words, when it comes servanthood there is no *both-and*.** You can't serve both God *and* Money; both God *and* Worldly Success; both God *and* Romance; both God *and* Self-Actualization. There's no room in your heart to give ultimate allegiance to both God and something or someone else.
 - In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once argued that **the human heart has the capacity for only one all-encompassing, all-embracing allegiance.** In other words, when it comes to servanthood, it's an *either-or* situation.

- ❖ On the Mount of Carmel, the prophet Elijah challenged God's people to choose (1 Kg. 18:21). They were trying to serve two masters, Yahweh and Baal. They were thinking a *both-and* strategy could work. But Elijah made it plain and clear that a compromising position won't work. "*How long will you go limping between to different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then following him.*"
 - ▶ It's either-or, people. You either serve Yahweh or you serve Baal. There's no middle position of compromise. **Limping your ultimate allegiance between God and some earthly relationship or some worldly pursuit is not going to cut it.** God won't tolerate it – no matter how much his churches might.

- ❖ This is the message Jesus gave to the church in Thyatira. He describes his people in v20 as his servants. And if they truly are his servants, they can't tolerate much longer another master in their lives or tolerate anyone who encourages a limping *both-and* approach to discipleship. They'll need to choose. No one can serve two masters.
 - ▶ As we dive into this morning's passage, we see Jesus doing three things. **First**, he commends a church for its growth and maturity. **Second**, he criticizes it for tolerating a spirit of compromise. And **third**, Jesus charges a church to hold fast to an uncompromised gospel.

Considering Context

- ❖ But before we begin, let's remember where we've been. For the past month, we've been in the book of Revelation. We're in a series called "Letters to Seven City Churches", and we've already covered three of them. We described Revelation as a circular letter that was intended to be passed along to these seven city churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor. The entire letter would've been read aloud to each congregation during their worship gathering, and particular attention would've been paid to the section directly addressed to them.
 - ▶ But for the church in Thyatira, being able to hear the messages to the previous three churches would've provided helpful context. The Thyatiran believers would've been encouraged to know that their struggles were not unique to them alone. In fact, the situation in Pergamum is quite similar to what's going on here.

- ❖ Both churches were under external pressure to conform to the standards of this world, and **in both situations, there were influencers in their churches trying to relieve that pressure by encouraging or excusing believers to make ever-so-slight compromises in their allegiance to Christ their Master and Lord.**
 - ▶ Last week, we explained that Pergamum was the capital of this Roman province, and it was the center of imperial cult religion (emperor worship). So the Pergamene church was under particular pressure to show loyalty to Caesar by sacrificing and feasting in his temple. And with the martyrdom of Antipas, the situation there had become life-threatening.

- ❖ **Now if Pergamum was the political hub and center of imperial religion in the province, then Thyatira was the manufacturing hub and center of industrial commerce.** If Pergamum was the Washington D.C., then Thyatira was the Detroit.
 - ▶ Thyatira was a blue-collared city known for its unusually high number of trade guilds (or today we might call them unions). Historians have noted the presence of trade guilds for wool workers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather workers, tanners, potters, bakers, bronze-smiths, and shoemakers.

- ❖ **Now unlike modern-day trade unions, these trade guilds were religious by nature.** Each guild had its own patron deity(ies), and every merchant or artisan in that trade was expected to pay their “dues” by regularly sacrificing and feasting at the temple. Now within a pagan worldview, any hope of socio-economic stability or prosperity rested upon the benevolence of these patron deities. So the last thing you want to do is dishonor the gods.
 - ▶ As we’ve mentioned before, these temple feasts were accompanied by illicit sexual practices like cult prostitution and drunken orgies. **So not only are you surrounded by idolatry, you’re inundated with sexual immorality. All in the name of social propriety.** That’s the price to pay if you want to succeed in your trade.

- ❖ At this point the situation for the Thyatiran church doesn't seem to be life-threatening, but they were certainly feeling threatened economically. And it’s in that sense that I think we can relate more with the pressures this church is facing than with the Pergamene church.
 - ▶ Think about the pressure. **Non-participation in these trade guilds – in their rituals and festivities – meant putting yourself in an economically disadvantaged position.** If a Christian leather worker or tanner dishonored the patron god of their trade by refusing to sacrifice or to participate in a feast, that could lead to economic ostracism. He could lose business. He could lose his job. His storefront could be vandalized. A Christian would be taking a huge economic risk by not conforming to societal norms.

Commending a Church

- ❖ This is the context into which Jesus is speaking through John’s letter. Now let’s first look at Jesus’ commendation of this church. Let’s read v19 again, *“I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.”*

- ▶ **So right off the bat, the church is commended for its growth and maturity.** This is in contrast to the Ephesian church whose first works of love and service were greater than their last (they abandoned their first love), but for the Thyatiran church their latter works exceeded their first. This was a growing church. Their ministry was expanding. They were known for their growing love, faith, service, and perseverance.
 - Every church would love to be known for that. Every church would love to hear that kind of commendation, especially from Jesus. So this church has a lot going for it.

- ❖ Now we all know the table is about to be turned in v20. That's when Jesus gets critical with this church. But before we go there, let's stop and draw out an important lesson. **Yes, this church has a serious problem at hand, but that didn't stop Jesus from taking the time to point out evidence of God's grace.** To point out the positive that God is doing among them. That's the first thing Jesus does. That's his default.
 - ▶ I think that's quite instructive for us. *What's your default? Do you tend to look first for what's wrong? Do you only look with a critical eye towards other people's faults?* Even though a church or an individual has some serious problems and issues that need addressing, what we learn from Jesus is that it's important to take the time to point out the good that God is doing in them.
 - Some of you have issues with your church – issues with your small group, your fellowship, your family, etc. There are some serious problems. I'm not saying to overlook them. Yes, address them. ***But before you speak a word of criticism, have you opened your eyes to look for evidences of grace? Are you aware of the good that God is doing and are you willing and able to articulate that first, before you speak your truth in love?***

Criticizing a Church

- ❖ That's Jesus' pattern. That's what we can learn from him. Now let's see how he criticizes the Thyatiran church for tolerating a spirit of compromise. See v20, *“²⁰But 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.”*
 - ▶ So much like in Pergamum, the Thyatiran church was giving a free pass to false teachers who were either encouraging or just excusing believers to compromise themselves through participation in the idolatrous practices of pagan society. **In other words, these teachers were giving Christians free license to attend trade guild festivities with all their accompanying immorality.**

- ❖ The primary source behind this teaching is described here as a woman named Jezebel. Now there very well could be a female teacher in the church named Jezebel, but it's likely just saying that this teacher (who I still believe is a woman) is **a type of Jezebel** – referring to the Old Testament character found in the book of 1 Kings (1 Kg. 16:31; 21:25).

- ▶ Just as in Pergamum the Nicolaitans were a type of the OT Balaam (their teaching was like that of Balaam's teaching), in the same way this false teacher in Thyatira was like the OT Jezebel.
 - In case you're unfamiliar, she was a daughter of the king of Tyre who married King Ahab of Israel. She was infamous for importing Baal worship and inciting Ahab and other Israelites to commit spiritual adultery (idolatry). Things came to a head at Mount Carmel, and as we saw earlier how the prophet Elijah confronted her *both-and* approach to serving Yahweh and Baal.

- ❖ So what Jesus is saying is that this false teacher in Thyatira is spreading (like Jezebel) a similar *both-and* approach to serving both Christ and some idol, some patron god. These church members are struggling under great pressure to stay faithful to Jesus while making a living and providing for their households. **And here comes this teacher who tries to relieve that pressure by peddling progressive ideas that permit compromises in one's allegiance to Christ in order to gain or to keep a competitive edge in the marketplace.**

- ❖ Like I said, this is familiar. We can relate to the same pressure in our day and age. If we want to keep a competitive edge, if we want to increase profits, if we just want to be a team-player or to just keep our job, then we'll have to face the mounting pressure to make ever-so-slight compromises.
 - ▶ I know many of you are feeling it. That if you don't make "an appearance" at certain work-related social functions that include elements or activities that border on the unholy – if you don't show up, you risk becoming an outsider among your colleagues.
 - Or if you don't bend the rules, just a little, when your boss asks you to pad the bottom line – if you're not a company man – then that's going to ruin any chance for career advancement in your company.

- ❖ And even if you don't face this kind of dilemma where the compromise is fairly obvious, **all of us feel the societal pressure to privatize our relationship with Jesus.** To keep our religion private and not bring it into the workplace or classroom. Compartmentalize all of that within Sunday mornings, and when you show up to work on Monday morning, keep business as business. Don't try to interject your faith.
 - ▶ **In fact, people will tell you that your religious values don't translate into success in the real world.** Putting others first, giving people 2nd-, 3rd-, 4th- chances, showing mercy – these virtues don't translate well into the marketplace. It's a tough economy out there and a highly competitive job market. Sometimes you have to be cutthroat. Sometimes you have to be ruthless.
 - But Christian, this is where you have to ask yourself: *Who do I serve? Who's my master? To whom do I owe ultimate allegiance?*

- ❖ That's the question the believers in Thyatira are forced to answer. ***In the end, what's most important to me – my allegiance to Christ or to my trade guild? What do I value more – my relationship with Jesus or the success of my business/career?***

- ❖ The spirit of Jezebel – the spirit of compromise – is very much with us. **There are those in the Church today who will excuse you to make those “necessary” compromises – to compromise your integrity, your values, your convictions.** All in the name of social propriety. All in the name of “being realistic”. All in the name of getting your head out of the spiritual clouds and living in the real world where you’re just going to have to bend a little if you want to succeed, if you want to achieve your goals.

- ❖ **To that spirit of compromise, Jesus speaks a word of rebuke, a word of repentance.** Look at v21, “²¹*I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.*” So a previous warning was apparently given to this Jezebel (likely someone else besides the Thyatiran church since they’re still tolerating her). She was warned to repent from her compromising behavior and from spreading the kind of teaching that encourages it. Yet she refused to repent, and for that judgment is coming.
 - ▶ Look at vv22-23, “²²*Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, 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.*”
 - Notice the mention of being thrown into a sickbed, thrown into great tribulation, being struck dead. This is all common biblical language that communicates punishment and suffering. Spiritual adultery (compromising with other gods/idols) will lead to spiritual sickness, which eventually leads to spiritual death.

- ❖ The verdict is in for Jezebel. She’s been found guilty – wanting of a repentant heart. Notice how in v21 Jesus doesn’t even consider her one of his servants. She’s not my servant. She’s the one “*teaching and seducing my servants.*” **She’s demonstrated that she’s not one of mine by her very refusal to repent.** If she was my servant, she would’ve repented
 - ▶ Now for those in the church influenced by her teaching (“*her children*”) the jury is still out. There is still a chance to repent of Jezebel’s works. Jesus is giving them a little more time. This is grace.
 - We’ve seen throughout Scripture that God’s many warnings of judgment are not to be read as spiteful or vindictive. Rather, they should be read as gracious. **His warnings are grace to those who have yet to repent of sin.**

- ❖ And when he brings down his judgment, Jesus will demonstrate to all the churches that he’s a righteous judge who searches minds and hearts to know exactly who is guilty, who is repentant, and who is truly one of his servants.
 - ▶ This ability to search mind and heart is the meaning behind the image we find in v18 where the Son of God is described as having “*eyes like a flame of fire*”. **In other words, Jesus’ eyes are like a beaming, bright searchlight that can see right through any pretense.** He can search our thoughts and intentions.

- ❖ Friends, there's no use hiding. No use pretending. **The compromises you've been making in your private life, your academic life, your work life may be hidden from our sight but not from Jesus'**. He is the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-righteous judge who will give to each of us according to our works.
 - ▶ This is not justification by works that we're talking about. **This is just saying that, in the end, your works demonstrate the true nature and true allegiance of your heart.** In this case, if you repent of these Jezebelian works, then you demonstrate yourself to be a true servant of Jesus. Jesus truly is your one and only Master.
- ❖ **Fish swim. Birds fly. Christians repent.** It's in our nature – our *new* nature that we receive through our new birth. When you're born again by the Spirit. It's in our new nature to repent.
 - ▶ Friends, I urge you then to repent of the spirit of compromise – to not tolerate it whether in your own life or in the life of your church. Turn away from the idols of this world and turn back to Jesus, and you'll find a just and righteous Judge but more than that you'll find gracious and merciful Savior.

Charging a Church

- ❖ So we've seen Jesus commending a church for its growth and maturity, criticizing the same church for its tolerance of a spirit of compromise, and thirdly, we see Jesus charging that church to hold fast to an uncompromised gospel. And what that looks like in practice is to practice biblical church discipline that will lead to putting Jezebel out of the church.
 - ▶ In v24 Jesus speaks to those in the church who have not compromised themselves personally (they don't hold to Jezebel's teaching), but have sadly tolerated her spirit of compromise for far too long. **Jesus charges the church to start exercising its God-given authority to make judgments in discipline.**
- ❖ Let's read vv24-25, *"²⁴But 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. ²⁵Only hold fast what you have until I come."*
 - ▶ So if you're not holding to this teaching of Jezebel, then Jesus says good for you. He says he lays on you no other burden except to hold fast to what you have until he comes. By that I take it to mean: keep holding fast to sound biblical truth. If you're not holding to false teaching, then you must be holding fast to sound teaching.
 - Jesus says that's what a church needs to focus on. There's no other burden but this. Hold fast to the truth. Hold fast to the gospel – an uncompromised, uncompromising gospel.
- ❖ I'm talking about the gospel of Jesus that says God is holy. We all have sinned thereby separating us from God. But God so loved us that he sent his Son to die on a cross and to rise again so that we might be forgiven and follow him for the rest of our days – just as servants follow their master or citizens their king. And anyone who repents of sin and believes this good news can have this new, eternal life in Christ.

- ▶ **That's the gospel, and it's uncompromising in the sense that you're either a repentor of sin or not. You're either a follower of Jesus as Master or not.** You're either a citizen of the kingdom and Jesus is your King or not. It's either-or. There's no both-and with some other master, some other king.

- ❖ Jesus is charging us, as a church, to hold fast to *this* gospel. **And then in vv26-27, he alludes to the judicial authority we've been given as a church that's to be exercised through the biblical practice of church discipline.** These verses make a direct reference to Psalm 2.

"²⁶The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷and 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."

 - ▶ If you're familiar with Psalm 2, then you know it points to God's coming Messiah who receives rule and authority to judge the nations as King (2:7-9). So by quoting the psalm, Jesus is saying he has this kind of judicial authority from the Father. And he already exercised it by making a judgment on Jezebel. **Based on her works, based on her refusal to repent, Jesus has judged her to be *not* one of his servants.** She's not a real Christian even though she's a member of a church.

- ❖ Now it's up for the church in Thyatira to pronounce that same judgment, exercising the authority Jesus entrusted to them. Jesus promises in v26 that to those who conquer – who don't compromise or tolerate the spirit of compromise – he imparts his own authority. *"To him I will give authority over the nations."* **Every church needs to recognize this authority we've been given and exercise it rightly by disciplining our own who refuse to repent from doctrinal or moral error** (Tit. 3:9-11; 2 Jn. 1:9-10; Rom. 16:17; Mt. 18:15-17).

- ❖ Friends, if you have a Jezebel in your church – someone who's spreading false doctrine, who's laying a stumbling block for others, who's enticing them to compromise allegiance to Christ – and assuming you've confronted this person and yet he or she refuses to repent (to turn away from these actions) – then you've got to discipline the Jezebel. You've got to excommunicate. That's the biblically appropriate response.
 - ▶ Now by excommunicate we don't mean publicly shame. We don't mean bar the person from attending church. **By excommunicate we mean cutting the person off from any practice or activity in the church that by mere participation would communicate one's status as a Christian, as one whose nature is to repent.**

- ❖ The primary example would be participation at the communion table. That's where the term *excommunicate* comes from. **When a church welcomes you to the communion table to eat the bread and drink the cup, that church is saying something positive about your status before God.** That church is affirming you to be a Christian. So to ex-communicate, at its most basic sense, means to exclude someone from the communion table.
 - ▶ If you think about it, it would be extremely cruel and unloving if a church recognized a Jezebel to be a Jezebel but did nothing and just tolerated her. Unloving to those she might harm with her false teaching, but unloving towards the Jezebel as well.

- **By tolerating and failing to excommunicate, you're giving the Jezebel false assurance.** You don't want her thinking she's in right relationship with God when she's deep in sin and far from repentance. But if you keep treating Jezebel like a believer, then that's exactly what you'd be doing.
- ❖ Friends, if someone you love, someone who professes to be a Christian, is holding fast to either compromised beliefs or compromised behavior...
 - ▶ And if their church has given them time to repent and yet they still refuse, if they're not acting like a Christian (remember it's in the nature of a Christian to repent!)...
 - Then the most loving thing you can do is *not* to tolerate them in their compromised state but to put them under a loving but firm process of discipline.
- ❖ **Whenever a church has to go through a season of discipline for one of its members, it always feels like a dark time, like a big, black, gloomy cloud is hanging over the church.** But to a church who faithfully holds fast to an uncompromised gospel, who faithfully disciplines its own members, Jesus promises in v28, *“²⁸And I will give him the morning star.²⁹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*
 - ▶ At the end of Revelation, Jesus speaks a final message to his churches and there, in chapter 22:16, he calls himself the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star (cf. Num. 24:17). So in v28 Jesus is referring to himself and his messianic reign, and he's promising to his people the honor of reigning with him when his kingdom comes in all its fullness.
- ❖ So even if a church finds itself in a season like the church in Thyatira, even if it feels like times are dark and dreadful, remember Jesus' promise. *“And I will give him the morning star.”* The morning star usually appears around two to three a.m. when the night is about as dark as it's going to get. **From the moment you spy that morning star, you can be sure the morning dawn is on its way.**
 - ▶ Take hope because the morning star is visible. You can see Him now. So you can be sure the dawn is coming. The King is coming and he's ushering in his kingdom. So hold fast. Don't compromise. And for their sake, don't tolerate anyone in the church who does.