

Main Idea: In the letter Jesus sent to the church at Thyatira, as recorded in Revelation 2:18-29, Jesus gives us four reasons why a church must be pure.

- I. Our Master is holy (18).
 - A. He sees.
 - B. He judges.
- II. Our Mission is clear (19).
- III. Our Menace is sin (20-25).
 - A. Sin displeases the Lord (20-21).
 1. Those who promote sin are guilty.
 2. Those who tolerate sin are guilty.
 - B. Sin destroys the church (22-23).
 1. It results in suffering.
 2. It results in death.
 3. It results in retribution.
 - C. Sin divides the church (24-25).
 1. Some give in.
 2. Some hold on.
- IV. Our Motivation is eternal (26-29).
 - A. Overcomers will enjoy the reign of Christ.
 - B. Overcomers will enjoy the presence of Christ.

The Bottom Line: Sin does matter. Just ask Jezebel and the church at Thyatira.

What would you do for one million dollars? The book, *The Day America Told the Truth*, is based on an extensive survey in which this question was asked. Participants were guaranteed anonymity as they answered the question, "What are you willing to do for \$10 million?" The answers reveal are alarming--25% would abandon their families, 23% would become a prostitute for a week, and 7% would kill a stranger. Just think of what that means. In a gathering of 100 Americans, there are seven who would consider killing you if the price was right.¹

It's no secret. Our country is in the midst of an ethical crisis. The most chilling fact, as Kent Hughes points out (ibid, 121), is this. There is little statistical difference between the ethical practices of the religious and the nonreligious. Gallup statistics show that 43% of non-church attenders admit to taking home supplies from work, compared to 37% of church-attenders. 17% of the unchurched use the company phone for long-distance personal calls, but 13% of church people do the same. Sadly, surveys show that Christians are almost as likely as non-Christians to falsify their income tax returns, commit plagiarism, bribe to obtain a building permit, ignore construction specifications, and illegally copy a computer program.

The Word of God is clear. We cannot serve God and money. Yet many try. We live in an age that has sacrificed integrity and purity on the altar of personal prosperity. This is not a new problem. Christians living 19 centuries ago in the city of Thyatira faced the same temptation. And many gave in.

Why must a church be holy? That's the question God answers for us in Revelation 2:18-29, in the fourth of Jesus' seven letters to His Church. The fourth letter was written to the church at Thyatira. Why is purity so important?

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ taken from Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, 119

In the letter Jesus sent to the church at Thyatira, as recorded in Revelation 2:18-29, Jesus gives us four reasons why a church must be holy.

Background: In Revelation 2-3, Jesus sent seven letters via the apostle John to seven churches located in Asia Minor. The fourth letter is addressed to the church located in the city of Thyatira. It's ironic that this is the longest letter, yet it's written to the most unimportant of the seven cities. Ephesus was a great city. So was Smyrna. Pergamum was the capital of the Roman province. But Jesus sent His longest message to the church situated in the smallest city--Thyatira.

Thyatira was a military town, as well as a commercial center. Thyatira was located on the Roman road that connected Pergamum (40 miles to the northwest) with Sardis. That was the road by which the imperial post traveled. Thyatira was known for its trade guilds which were associations of people employed in certain trades.² There were guilds of workers in wool, leather, linen, bronze, garment makers, potters, bakers, and slave-dealers.

Don't miss this. Quite likely, this is a key to understanding the problem that plagued the church at Thyatira.³ Trade guilds were kind of like our unions today. To refuse to join one of these guilds would be somewhat like refusing to join a trade union. It could be commercial suicide.

You might wonder, "Why wouldn't a Christian join a trade guild in Thyatira?" The answer had little to do with economics, but everything to do with the gospel. You see, these guilds had close religious ties with the pagan, Roman gods. The members of the guilds quite often had big banquets together, but they didn't meet downtown at the Local-555. They met at the temple. They began and ended their meeting with a formal sacrifice to their pagan god. The meat they ate was the meat they had offered to their idol. What's more, quite often these meals turned into what we would call a drunken orgy.

So, if you were a Christian tradesman in Thyatira, would you join the trade guild? Now, with that background, we are ready to see the first reason holiness is so important.

I. Our Master is holy (18).

Revelation 2:18 says, "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." Remember, each of the seven letters begins with a description of Christ that is significant to the problem of the particular church. Notice two characteristics highlighted here pertaining to Christ.

A. He sees.

In fact, we're told He has "eyes like a flame of fire." By the way, this is the only letter in which the Lord is referred to as the "Son of God," which calls attention to His divine majesty. He has flaming eyes, which reveals to us something awesome about our Lord. The fact that his eyes are blazing underscores His holy indignation against sin. He not only sees us, but His gaze penetrates to the very core of our being. He sees the good, He also sees the bad. He sees the sin that goes on in secret, hidden from all but Him.

² Barclay, 102

³ See Barclay, 102

B. He judges.

His feet are like "fine bronze." Brazen feet stand for the immovable power of the Risen Christ.⁴ Feet are used not only to walk, but also to trample, to stamp out. That the Lord has feet like bronze reveals to us that He is One who takes action to deal with what He sees. Beloved, this description of Christ hints to us at the outset that the letter that will follow will not be filled with frivolous small-talk and friendly chatting.

Which underscores the first reason we ought to be holy. Our Master is holy.

II. Our Mission is clear (19).

You might be surprised by verse 19. The Lord's letter does not begin with criticism, but with a compliment. In verse 19, Jesus says, "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."

It wasn't that the church in Thyatira wasn't doing anything for God. Not at all. Christ acknowledges six positive areas. He knew their deeds [KJV 'works']--they were a church full of activity. He knew their love--their was a great atmosphere of acceptance in the church. He knew their faith and service--people were busy serving the Lord in the first Church of Thyatira. Christ commended them for their perseverance (lit. "longsuffering")--remember, they lived in an environment that was hostile to Christianity, but they hung in there.

Here was a church that on the surface was strong and attractive. They were busy for God. Some Christians are all talk, no action. Not these followers of Christ. In fact, they were actually improving, as the final phrase indicates, "you are now doing more than you did at first."

When you think about it, Christ's commendation is quite impressive. The church at Ephesus had left its first love. The church at Thyatira hadn't. They were growing. They were improving. They were a church that knew their mission was clear.

There was a lot going for the church in Thyatira. But there was also one perilous flaw. It had to do with purity. Consider this astute observation by William Barclay (104):

"A Church which is crowded with people and which is a hive of energy is not necessarily a real Church. It is possible for a Church to be crowded because its people come to be entertained instead of instructed, and to be soothed instead of confronted with the fact of sin and the offer of salvation; it may be a highly successful Christian club rather than a real Christian congregation."

My friends, no amount of service for Christ can compensate for tolerance of evil. This is what the Christians at Thyatira (at least some of them) missed. They failed to grasp the third reason a church must be holy. We must be holy, first, because our Master is holy, and secondly, because our mission is clear, and thirdly because...

III. Our Menace is sin (20-25).

The first word of verse 20 puts a lump in our throat, "Nevertheless" [KJV 'Notwithstanding']. The One Who has blazing eyes sees more than the surface activity in

⁴ Barclay, 103

a church. He sees more than what are doing. He sees what we should have done. He sees where we have been lax and tolerant.

Consider His words to the church in verse 20, "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel [KJV 'thou sufferest 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."

Our menace is sin. It was in Thyatira. Why is sin our menace? Because there are three dangerous consequences connected to sin.

A. Sin displeases the Lord (20-21).

Do you know what the problem was in Thyatira? It was very similar to the problem we observed in Pergamum last week. They tolerated sin. The church at Pergamum tolerated two dangerous groups in the church--proponents of the doctrine of Balaam, and teachers of the doctrines of the Nicolaitans. Christ said, "Repent, or else I will come." That is, "Either you stop tolerating sin in your midst and deal with it, or I will!"

Who were they tolerating in Thyatira? A woman the Lord identifies as "Jezebel." Who was she? There are a lot of suggestions. One is that it was the bishop's wife. Another is that it was Lydia, the seller of purple, whom Paul led to Christ at Philippi. She was from Thyatira, but other than that fact, we have no reason to believe she was the guilty party. In point of fact, it's useless to conjecture who she was beyond what we're told of her in the text.

Jesus reveals this about her. She claimed to be a prophetess. She led church members into acts of immorality and idolatry. She is called "Jezebel." Quite likely, this was not her real name (it's doubtful parents would name their baby after such an infamous woman). Yet this name sized up the character of this woman.

Who was the original Jezebel? She was the daughter of the king of Sidon who married Ahab, king of Israel. When she came from Sidon, she brought her own pagan gods with her. She even supported 450 prophets of Baal. Her aim (at least at first) was not to banish the worship of Yahweh, but to get the people to accept Baal worship in addition to the worship of Yahweh. Whoever didn't, she killed. She's the one who orchestrated the murder of Naboth. 2 Kings 9:22 indicates she plagued Israel with harlotries and sorceries.

The Jezebel of Thyatira followed in her wicked steps. How? Verse 20 says she tried to "seduce my servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols [KJV]." What's that mean? Plug in what we learned about the trade guilds in Thyatira, and you'll get an idea...

Should a Christian go to a trade guild banquet in honor of a pagan god, where the food eaten was sacrificed to that idol, and where sexual perversions will be practiced? Jezebel stepped forward and said, "I have a message from God. Yes, go to the banquet. Don't separate yourself from the trade guilds. If we don't go, it'll be bad for our testimony (what she meant was, "It'll be bad for our bank accounts")."

We're to be *in the world* but not *of the world*. It's not always easy to tell when we've crossed the line. Leon Morris is right, "Every generation of Christians must face the question, 'How far should I accept and adopt contemporary standards and practices?' On the one hand, the Christian must not deny his faith. On the other, he must not deny

his membership of society. The cause of Christ is not served if Christians appear as a group of old-fashioned people trying to retreat from the real world.”⁵

The question is vital. How far should we go? The church at Thyatira went too far.

It's a terrible thing to displease the Lord. But that's what sin does. Jesus Christ says to a church that winked at sin, “I have this AGAINST YOU.” Don't miss this. Who was guilty in Thyatira? There were two guilty parties in Thyatira, and in any church that tolerates sin.

1. Those who promote sin are guilty.

Jezebel was guilty. She called herself a prophetess. She claimed to speak for God. But it was a sham. She seduced the followers of Christ.

By the way, the text doesn't say her teaching ministry was necessarily formal. In other words, it doesn't necessitate she was using the pulpit. The most influential teachers in some churches never stand behind a pulpit. They do their teaching in the foyer, or over the telephone, or in conversations with church members at Bob Evans *after* the morning message. This Jezebel wasn't a pastor or elder in the church—according to 1 Timothy 3:1ff. and Titus 1:5ff God says only a man can hold that position and it's doubtful this Jezebel was overtly challenging that standard. But she was teaching, nonetheless, and her message was undermining the holiness of the church.

As bad as that was, she was guilty of a worse crime than her false teaching. What was that? Verse 21 indicates that when confronted, she refused to repent. “I have given her time to repent of her immorality [KJV ‘I gave her space to repent’], but she is unwilling.”

Yes, she was guilty. But don't miss this. Someone else was guilty. Who? The church was! To the church, Jesus said, “I have this against YOU.”

2. Those who tolerate sin are guilty.

No amount of Christian service compensates for tolerating evil. We can't keep sin from happening in the world, but we must not tolerate it in the church. God holds accountable not only those who sin, but those who wink at sin in the church. Not that Christians are perfect. A church does not discipline a person because of sin (or we would all be disciplined every day!), but because of a refusal to repent of sin. Why is sin our menace? First, because sin displeases the Lord.

B. Sin destroys the church (22-23).

God gave Jezebel time to repent of her sins of immorality and idolatry, as well as for the church to deal with the sin problem, but the hourglass of His longsuffering had run out. It was time to act.

Verse 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.” Sin left unchecked was going to destroy the church. In what way? Notice three results of sin.

1. It results in suffering.

The NASB puts it this way, “I will cast her upon a bed of sickness.” This is serious business. Is there hope available for sinners? Absolutely, if they repent (22). When a person admits his or her guilt, calls sin “sin,” and stops making excuses (“I

⁵ *Revelation*, Leon Morris, pp. 71-2.

couldn't help myself. My parents didn't raise me right."), there is hope. *But...* if a person refuses to repent, he brings suffering on himself.

2. *It results in death.*

Verse 23—"I will strike her children dead [KJV 'And I will kill her children with death']..." "Her children" could refer to this woman's biological children, but more likely the Lord is talking about her spiritual offspring, those who follow her deadly teaching.

Beloved, there are consequences to sin, emotional and at times physical. God takes action against persistent, unrepentent behavior by His people. Sometimes He uses death (see 1 Cor 11:30-32). Why would He do that? He tells us at the end of verse 23, "Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds." Notice that judgment against sin is a deterrent to further sin. God's judgment against one person's sin can prevent other people from foolishly following the same path. Why? Because they can see that God takes sin seriously!

3. *It results in retribution.*

Notice the shift in pronouns at the end of verse 23, "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." What's the Lord saying to the church? Just this. "I'm going to deal with Jezebel. I'm going to deal with those following Jezebel. But know this. If the rest of you in the church are lax towards sin as Jezebel has been, I'll deal with YOU in the same way!"

Three consequences—one, sin displeases the Lord; two, sin destroys the church.

C. Sin divides the church (24-25).

Thankfully, not everyone had gone astray in Thyatira. God had His godly remnant to which the Lord spoke in verses 24-25, "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): Only hold on to what you have until I come."

Please notice that Satan was behind the sin problem in the church. He was influencing this "Jezebel" to divide the church. Based on the Lord's admonition we learn that there are two types of people in churches, and here they are. When tempted...

1. *Some give in.*

2. *Some hold on.*

The ones who followed Jezebel, gave in. To the rest, the Lord gave this simple charge in verse 25, "Only hold on to what you have until I come."

Have you ever felt, "There's sin all around. What can I do?" Jesus gives us one simple command, "Hold on to what you have till I come." Notice He didn't tell the faithful remnant to run from the problem. He said, "Hold on."

Think about the contrast between the problem of the church at Ephesus and the church at Thyatira. Warren Wiersbe points out (575), "The Ephesian church was weakening in its love, yet faithful to judge false teachers; while people in the assembly at Thyatira were growing in their love, but too tolerant of false doctrine. Both extremes must be avoided in the church...Unloving orthodoxy and loving compromise are both hateful to God."

A key verse which will keep us in balance is Ephesians 4:15, which says in part, "Speaking the truth in love." Truth and love, we need both. If we have only truth, but no

love, we'll become cold and harsh in dealing with people. If we have love without truth, we'll tolerate sin because we're afraid to offend someone.

There's a fourth reason why the church must be pure.

IV. Our Motivation is eternal (26-29).

Why hold on to purity? Our motivation is anchored in eternity future. There will be two rewards for those who hold on to holiness when others are giving in.

A. Overcomers will enjoy the reign of Christ (26-27).⁶

Listen to Christ's promise in verse 26-27, "To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. '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."

The promise in verse 27 comes from Psa 2:9, which is a Messianic psalm. The psalm says when the Messiah comes, He will rule the nations. Jesus reveals that He will share this rule with His disciples, the overcomers (see Rev 20:6). What does that mean? It means, at least in part, that those who are true to Christ NOW will enjoy the reign of Christ THEN.

Jesus mentions another reward in verse 28, "I will also give him the morning star."

B. Overcomers will enjoy the presence of Christ (28-29).

In Revelation 22:16, Jesus Himself is called "the bright and morning star." The promise of the morning star is the promise of Christ Himself. Don't miss this. Here's our greatest motivation for holiness. There's coming a day when overcomers will enjoy the presence of their Lord and Savior.

With that Jesus finishes His letter to the church in Thyatira. Verse 29—"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Back to our original question. Why must a church be holy? For four reasons. Our Master is holy. Our mission is clear. Our menace is sin. Our motivation is eternal. Why must you and I be pure as individuals? For the same reasons.

Friends, we are faced with some important questions, the chief being this. Are we going to take seriously the message Christ gave to the church at Thyatira, or are we not? Are we going to tolerate sin in our lives, or are we going to repent and run to Christ for forgiveness? Are we going to deal with sin in our church in a biblical way, or are we going to coast along thinking it doesn't matter to God?

The Bottom Line: Sin does matter. Just ask Jezebel, and the church at Thyatira.

Personal Reflection (with heads bowed): Is your life pure or is there known sin you are tolerating? What about in your family? Are you committed to purity in your home? Have you been exhibiting purity where you work, or go to school?

Communion (to follow)

⁶ Once again, the Lord commends the person who "overcomes" (see 2:7, 11, 17).