

# Don't tolerate false teaching: don't die of complacency.

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[ 0 : 00 ] So verse 18, unto 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. I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you. 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. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 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, and I will strike her children dead. Now all the churches will know that I am he who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. 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. Only hold fast what you have until I come.

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will roll them with a rod of iron, as when earth and pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father, and I will give him the morning star. He who is an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. And to the angel of the church in Sardis write the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not sold their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. Excuse me, I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen. That is the word of God. May he apply it to our hearts and to our minds. Let's have a moment of prayer.

Lord God, how we praise you that you have not left us to find our way to you, to grove around in the darkness, searching and never finding, stumbling, and never actually reaching any real truth, any real insights about you. Thank you who have given to us your written word, that word which your living Holy Spirit can take and point us to the living Christ himself. We pray that will be our experience today. As we draw aside for these few moments to listen to what you are saying to the churches, help us indeed to hear the voice of your Spirit. And when we hear that voice to obey, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

[ 3 : 50 ] I want to begin with a question. Why do churches die? Now, I'm not asking why buildings close down, because the church is not a building. A building is only ever a temporary place, and of course it is temporary because the church's destiny is eternal. It's not simply for this earth. One of the reasons, of course, why buildings close down, because there are far too many of them. A few weeks ago, I spent a weekend in a very pleasant seaside town, which, and on the main street, there are two massive churches, almost diagonally opposite each other. Hard to believe that even at the time of Victorian church going, that they could ever have been anything like Phil's. And of course, now, there hardly anybody goes at all. Too many churches, both in the wrong places, often like they're in competition with each other. There are other Scottish church history in the 19th century.

Many buildings are where there used to be population, the population's moved. And they become industrial sites, and so on. Now, I'm asking the question, why do living communities of God's people cease to be? These seven lamps in Roman Asia, why did they disappear? Where are they now? Why are they not flourishing now? And we've got two answers to it in the two churches we're looking at. These are our two main points. False teaching and complacency. These are reasons why churches die.

Because these two churches, Thyatira and Sardis, both important trading centers, significant communities, they both represent two dangers. They both represent two temptations which the church often succumbs to.

And the first one, the church of Thyatira, don't tolerate false teaching. It's what the risen Lord is saying. Now, the church in Thyatira, their patron god was Apollo. Apollo was known as the son of Zeus.

[ 5 : 59 ] And to this place which worships the son of Zeus comes the son of God himself. The son of Zeus, we are told, whose eyes see everything. Here to them comes the son of God, whose eyes are like a flame of fire. And Apollo, whose feet stand firmly, and he can't be moved from his place, whose feet are like burnished bronze. The son of God comes to this church. He looks at them, and you'll notice he praises them first of all. Verse 19, I know your works, your love, faith, and service, and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. In other words, not only were they a church, which should exemplify all these qualities, love, faith, serving the Lord, patient endurance, these were actually growing. But, as we've noticed, it's not a case that the risen Lord is giving a checklist and saying, oh, you're all right if you manage to get three out of six, or four out of six. The risen Lord is presenting himself as the Lord of the church. The Spirit and the Word as the guidance to the church. We can't pick and choose. You see, we noticed a few weeks ago in Ephesus. Ephesus was not troubled by false teaching, but Ephesus was going to be removed because of its lack of love. And so here in Thyatira, warm, faithful service cannot compensate for false teaching. These things go together. You see, in Ephesus, their desire for sound doctrine and made them harsh and critical and dismissive of everybody else. Whereas in Thyatira, their love had become indulgence. They accepted everything and anything. If somebody came along with false teaching and presented it attractively, they would simply fall for it. So what's happening then? What is the false teaching doing? Remember in the Bible, both in Old and New Testaments, false teaching isn't a minor thing. It's not something you'd be better without. This is something which actually destroys the body of Christ, a kind of cancer that grows in the body and destroys it.

Well, first of all, false teaching leads to ungodly living. If we think wrong thoughts about God, if we think wrong thoughts about the gospel, then we're going to start behaving and living in the wrong way. Notice this against you, verse 20, you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess.

Jezebel in the Old Testament, the implacable opponent of Elijah, the prophet. And obviously here, Jezebel is either an individual, particularly influential woman, or perhaps a group of people. And the point is, this group of people, or this individual, are actually filling the church with false teaching. You notice the word, verse 20, you tolerate. Not that you agree with her. It's not necessary. The risen Lord is saying, I'm not saying you believe that yourself, but you let her away with it.

And this is what John is so concerned with. Remember John's right at the very end of the first century. All the other apostles apart from him have gone. And as the apostles come near the end of their time on earth, 30 years earlier, Peter and Paul, in their later letters, had been very concerned. How is the church going to remain apostolic after the apostles have gone? The answer of Peter, of Paul, and of John is by being faithful the apostolic gospel. Not tolerating that woman Jezebel for false teaching. Essentially teaching that God doesn't matter, that God doesn't care about the way we behave. I gave her time to practice sexual immorality, to eat food sacrificed to idols, calling holy what God calls sinful. Laxity in personal relationships. So false teaching leads to bad living. But it's worse than that. False teaching leads to death. Verse 21, I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

[ 10 : 32 ] Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed and those who commit adultery, unless they repent of their works, and I will strike their children dead. Now that doesn't necessarily mean physical death. It can mean that. But what I think it more particularly means is that churches which follow this teaching will die out. Their children will be dead. See, this teaching is supposed to be liberating. It's

supposed to be enlightening. It's supposed to appeal to contemporary people. By the way, remember everybody is contemporary to themselves. Nobody said in the first century it was great to live in the ancient world. And nobody said, nobody said about the fifth century, isn't it wonderful now in the Middle Ages?

Everybody is contemporary. You see, this kind of teaching, look around, this has emptied the churches. After all, why bother coming to church if all you're going to be told is you're fine anyway. Christ loves you, whatever you do. I mean, why bother? I mean, if I believe that, I just stay in bed on Sunday morning. What normal people do, read the Sunday papers to go for a walk. You see, the point is this does not lead to life. It leads to death. False teaching leads to death. And Christ sees right through this sham, I am he, verse 23, who searches the minds and the heart. False teaching leads to bad living. False teaching leads to death. But false teaching also leads to pride. Verse 24, to the rest of you in Thyatira, notice not everybody in Thyatira is affected by this. To the rest, those who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan. It's always been a great temptation to the church right from the beginning to regard, for people to regard themselves as part of an elite who know things, deep things that other people don't know. What in the early centuries called Gnosticism, a kind of deep knowledge which only the initiates know about. Gnostics essentially believed that the spirit was good and matter was evil.

Gnosticism, a kind of deep knowledge which only the spirit was good and the spirit was good. In the immortality of the soul, not the resurrection of the body. He didn't like the body. He didn't like the material world. And therefore, they didn't like the gospel. Because the gospel hope is not disembodied existence in a shadow land, wearing ethereal negligees and floating on clouds and strumming harps. What a boring way to spend eternity. If that's what it's about, then no thanks. The biblical hope is of a glorious new creation, an embodied creation. That Paul is the same in one of his later letters in Philippians, from heaven we wait for a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We'll change our lowly bodies and make them like his glorious body. And you see, if we despise the body, it can lead to two things. It can lead on the one hand to simply indulge the body doesn't matter, so it's my body, I can do what I like.

Or it can lead to a kind of pseudo-super spirituality which tries to be holier than God. Like Simeon Stylites, who perched on top of a pillar for 30 years and imagined that made him more holy.

[14:14] One mind boggles, as you think, the condition it must have been like on top of that pillar. But this is what happens when we have an unbiblical idea of the created order. So what can be done?

The risen Lord says, verse 25, hold fast what you have. Hold fast to the gospel you've been given until I come. Hold fast because I'm coming. Indeed, the word there is until I arrive. Suggestion is of someone already on his way. I think that's so important. And hold fast till I arrive, and I will, whoever keeps my works to the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, he will rule them.

And this word rule is a very interesting word. In Greek, it's the word pastor, shepherd. He will shepherd the nations with a rod of iron. Translators can't really come at this at all. They don't like this because they like the idea of the pastor as a nice little man leading little lambs out into a gentle mist called fog and drinking cups of tea and so on. But no, that's not what John is saying.

If you hold fast, you are going to have a wonderful eternity. I will give him the morning star, probably preparing back to Daniel 12, those who are wise will shine like the stars of heaven, and those who turn many to righteousness forever and ever. So Thyatira, don't tolerate false teaching.

Now the spotlight moves again, and it moves this time to Sardis, the ancient capital of the province of Lydia, on a main highway. Now by the time John writes, at the end of the first century, this city had passed its ancient glories. It's still quite significant, but it was living on a past reputation. And by a strange irony, the church as well is living on its past reputation. Always a danger for churches which have been flourishing once to live on their reputation. And to this dying church, the risen Lord, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God. I think the seven spirits of God is a poetic way of talking about the Holy Spirit and the fullness of his power. The risen Lord, the Spirit, comes to this church in all the authority and all the power of the Spirit. The danger of nominalism. Verse 1, you have the reputation of being alive, but you're dead. Once a vibrant gospel church, but now dying embers.

[16:53] Many churches live on the good old days, on the glories of the past, what we used to be. Forgetting, of course, that the Lord is not any longer in the past.

The kind of thing that still said, oh, I remember the days when we used to have children flocking into the Sunday school, forgetting that those were the days before the internet and TV and all the rest of it and so on. The idea that the Lord is trapped in the past. If we could simply reproduce the past. We can't do that. No one lives there anymore. That's a recipe for death. Sardis is full of complacent people who no longer care, live on their reputation of being alive.

Always nervous when churches describe themselves as busy and regard that as a compliment. Reticent activity, as if that were a substitute for the presence of the Spirit.

Their patron saint is Martha rather than Mary. Prepare the busyness and the fuss rather than listening to the Lord. Wake up, says the risen Lord. Don't go to sleep. Twice in the recent, when I say the recent past, I mean the recent past of the city of Sardis. The city had fallen through carelessness and the church is in danger also of being destroyed through carelessness. The need to wake up to, strengthen what remains. Now notice, the point is, the life hasn't died out completely. This is not Laodicea whom we're looking at in a couple of weeks' time. This church has not quite died the way Laodicea has. This church still has gospel, if you like, gospel convictions. The trouble is they are no longer holding them in a living way. They are holding them in a way that is simply a kind of mental adherence to certain principles. So the risen Lord, he's not saying, go back into the past. He's saying, remember what made you strong in the past. That's the point. And live that now. Not live in the past, but what was it the Lord did in your lives and in your church all those years ago?

[ 19 : 33 ] 50, say 50 years before? It won't be in exactly the same way. It won't be exactly the same techniques and methods. These change over the generations, over the years, but those principles that kept you alive.

I often say to young couples in marriage preparation classes, when you fall out, which you're bound to do, what was it that attracted you to each other in the first place? Remember, not remember in the sense of trying to go back, but remember in the sense of what was it that was at the heart of the relationship?

That's what the risen Lord is saying. Keep it. Remember what you strengthen what remains about to die. Keep it. Verse 3. Keep what you received and heard. Hundreds of sermons you listened to. The multitude of activities you engaged in. The abundance of the blessing of the risen Lord. Keep that. Hold on to it. That's what matters. Why do churches die? Some churches die, as I say, because in the wrong place. Other churches die because complacency grips them and the divine spirit simply departs. Now you'll notice, of course, as well, verse 4, you have still a few names in Sardis.

In the deadest churches, there is still the possibility of living faithfully. Just as in the most thriving churches, there is the possibility of falling away. The word is to the church, to the corporate body. [ 21 : 14 ] But it's also to individuals. You still have a few names in Sardis. People who have not soiled their garments. White. White is a sign of holiness, a sign of forgiveness. In chapter 19 of the book, the climax of the book, when the bride of the Lamb is presented to her husband, she is dressed in pure linen, in white linen. So it is a call to holiness. The one who conquered, I will never blot his name out of the book of life. Now this does not mean that they're in danger of losing their personal salvation. People who are saved are saved. If they're genuinely saved, they never lose their salvation. What the risen Lord is saying is you can easily lose your testimony, though. You can easily lose a living testimony to the Lord who saved you. So the call here to be clothed in white garments is showing by their lives that they are truly converted. Theologian Jim

Packer said the only sign, true sign of past conversion is present convertedness. When I was a boy, it doesn't happen so much now, I used to hear testimonies from people often.

The trouble was all these testimonies tended to follow a similar pattern. They would talk about the day they were converted and then it seemed as if nothing had happened after then. You know, they'd lived gloriously sinful lives, then the Lord saved them, and life appears to have been a terrible anticlimax since then. Point is, testimonies ought to begin at that point, not to end at that point. And so often, in a certain type of preaching of the gospel in earlier generations, it was simply, well, you must be saved, you must come to Christ, which is true. But the Christian life, the whole experience of developing Christian life was not emphasized. And it's not surprising that so many churches like that ended up as sardis, the reputation of being alive, pure dead. So we need to guard against the wolf. We need to fight the wolf, the false teacher. We also need to guard against complacency.

Notice, I will confess his name before my father and his angels. The risen Lord is going to honor those who stand for him in this world. And only as we listen to the spirit can we live that kind of life. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord God, we confess that we are so easily seduced by false teaching, so easily seduced as well, by the kind of living that is simply a sham and simply an outward show. Help us, Lord, to be always alert, to hear the true, authentic gospel voice, always keeping our ears open so that we may hear what the spirit says to the churches. We ask this in the name of the Lord of the church, Christ Jesus himself. Amen.