

Beware Devotion without Discernment

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[0 : 00] Good. We turn now to God's words and we're in the book of Revelation and chapter 2. And we're in the letter to the church in Thyatira. So chapter 2 verse 18.

I don't have the church Bible number in front of me, but 1029. So if you've got the church Bible 1029. Revelation 2 verse 18.

And to 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 days, your latter works exceed the first.

But 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.

[1 : 22] 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.

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. 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 rule 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.

[2 : 38] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. Good Lord. Please do turn back to the passage we read a bit earlier in Revelation chapter 2. And this letter to the church in Thyatira.

Amen. The Lord Jesus Christ is jealous for his church.

Each of these seven letters is written with the aim of helping and encouraging the churches which he loves to grow and hold firm and remain faithful.

The Lord Jesus, have we seen, walks amongst his churches, tending to them, nurturing them. He sees his churches for what they truly are.

[3 : 43] He knows them as they really are. And so he knows what they need to be told. And that means bringing words of encouragement, but also words of sharp rebuke.

Difficult, hard, bold words. Like the words in our passage this evening in this letter to the church in Thyatira. Can you imagine the chap who carried this letter, which we now know as the letter of Revelation, the book of Revelation, this series of letters to the seven churches?

Can you imagine him as he's been delivering this around the different churches as he closes in on Thyatira? Can you imagine him as he's been delivering this around the different churches?

And it is not a comfortable read, is it? For this is the Lord Jesus Christ who searches minds and hearts. His eyes are like flames of fire.

He sees what is really going on and he's prepared to say what his people perhaps are not prepared to say. It's a stern letter, isn't it, as we read through it.

[5 : 26] So we'll look at this under three points. First, churches that are growing can still have serious blind spots. Second, churches must not tolerate people within the church who seduce others into sin.

And thirdly, churches that hold firm to Jesus until the end will inherit the earth. So then, first, churches that are growing can still have serious blind spots.

As with each of the letters we've seen so far, this letter begins with words of commendation from the Lord. And they are high praise indeed, aren't they? Look what Jesus says about this church. Verse 19, I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance and that your latter works exceed the first.

This church in Thyatira, it is a church marked by real growth in the gospel. Love, faith, service, patient endurance.

[6 : 36] All marks of this church, all marks of this church. And they are making real progress. Their latter works exceed their works at the start.

And that's a real contrast to the church in Ephesus we saw a few weeks ago, which had abandoned what they were at first. Ephesus was a church strong on doctrine, but really quite weak on devotion. The opposite is true here in Thyatira. Thyatira, in contrast, is a church growing and making progress. It is a church strong on devotion.

The Lord Jesus knows it. And he commends them for it. Now, these are good things. These are things the Lord Jesus wants to see in every church.

And Thyatira is to keep going at these things, to keep growing. To keep growing in their devotion of him. But there is a danger in amongst all that growth.

[7 : 39] The fact that the church there was making progress did not mean that all was well. Growth in itself can lull a congregation into a false sense of security.

It can be very tempting to think, can't it, that the mere fact of growth means there can't be any major issues going on. If there are real problems, we wouldn't be growing.

Some may have reasoned. But churches that are growing can have serious blind spots. Now, that's true in all sorts of avenues of life, isn't it?

Overall growth can hide disturbing realities that are easily overlooked or ignored. Because, well, things are growing. Think about a business, for example.

Excellent growth. The bottom line is very healthy indeed. But there is a key person high up in the organization who is really a bit of a bully.

[8 : 39] And has made life miserable for their team. The team they manage. Now, left unchecked, the bulk of his high quality team will leave the business.

And that will, in the end, be reflected in the bottom line. The organization's leaders didn't tackle this individual either because they hadn't been paying attention.

Or because the big picture was just so rosy. They didn't want the hassle of dealing with this particular individual. Nor the fallout that would inevitably bring. It's true in business.

So, too, with churches. The general picture can be very positive. The works, love and faith and service and patient endurance and latter works exceeding the first, all paint a very positive picture of growth.

But real and significant issues are not tackled. Either because growth has distracted the attention of the church or because there's been an unwillingness to tackle real problems.

[9 : 45] Certain issues have been tolerated foolishly. And that seems to be the situation here in Thyatira. Great growth.

Lots of positives. But as with so many of these letters, there is a significant but that follows these words of praise. No different here in Thyatira.

Great praise and progress, but there's a but. There are issues in that church that, if unaddressed, will undo all the growth. So, let's look on then to that problem, our second point.

Churches must not tolerate people within the church who seduce others into sin. The church there in Thyatira was in real danger.

Despite great growth, they were tolerating a particular individual within the church, and that posed a real danger. They tolerated a person they ought not to have tolerated.

[10 : 50] This was a church abounding in devotion, but lacking in discernment. So, who was this woman? What had she done?

Well, look at verse 20. 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. People in the church, it seems, were engaging in the similar sorts of behavior as we saw last week in Pergamon. Sexual morality and idolatry.

But the difference here in Thyatira is the source of the problem. Here in Thyatira, it wasn't so much external pressure, but rather an insidious influence within.

It was an individual within the church that was ruining others. They were tolerating a Jezebel. Now, that could have been her actual name, but at the very least, it's a clear reference to their Old Testament villainess.

[12 : 05] In the 9th century BC, Jezebel was an unbelieving princess from Sidon, whom Israel's king Ahab had married for political reasons.

She brought with her false gods. And soon, lots of pagan priests had spread the worship of Baal and Asherah through the land. God's people were seduced by the idea that these Sidonian gods would bring economic prosperity.

And so Jezebel's idolatry involving ritual prostitution and pagan shrines swept the land. And the fact that Jesus uses the same name for this woman here in Thyatira, and what he goes on to say about what she was doing, indicates the sort of woman that this was.

This second Jezebel encouraged Christians to engage in the ceremonies and feasts that were so much part and parcel of economic life there in Thyatira.

Thyatira was a fairly small town, but known for its many trade guilds. And if you wanted to get on in economic life with those trade guilds, you had to throw your lot in with all that went with it.

[13 : 22] Pagan rituals, all these sorts of immoralities and idolatries. And this participation that Jezebel was pushing and urging will include, as we see there, sexual immorality and idolatry.

And this Jezebel seems to have seduced Christians in the church to believe that their faith in Christ didn't exclude them from the trade guild idolatries that would guarantee them economic well-being.

She said, you can have it all. You can remain a Christian, but throw your lot in with these trade guilds and all that goes with it. Seductive message for those Christians there in Thyatira.

You can have it both ways. You can enjoy all the benefits of being in Christ while fully engaging in these pagan rituals. It was a dangerous message, and it sucked in Christians in the church.

And this was deadly serious, as the Lord Jesus goes on to demonstrate. The actions Jesus promises to take just show how serious it is.

[14 : 30] What does Jesus say he will do to her and those who follow her? Well, look on, verse 21. 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.

The Lord Jesus has been patient with this Jezebel. He's given her time to repent. And that is the grace of God, isn't it?

He is gracious and patient. He does give time for his wayward people, for wayward individuals to repent, to return to him. But there does come a time when he says no longer, no longer will I wait. Now this Jezebel had had time. We're not told how long, but she's had time, and she's refused to repent. And the Lord Jesus promises to throw her onto a sickbed.

[15 : 47] Now let's be clear what this is and isn't saying. This is not saying that those who find themselves on a sickbed are automatically there because they behaved in Jezebel sorts of ways.

The vast majority of sickness and pain we endure in this world is because we live in this world, a fallen world, a world full of suffering and under the curse.

Now some suffering experience is of course due to our own foolish decisions, but most of it is due to the fact we live in this world. But what this is saying is that sometimes, sometimes the Lord will bring someone down.

He will bring them to their sickbed because of unrepentant and destructive sin, sin that threatens his church. He will bring them down in order to protect his church, the church for which he died.

So this judgment on Jezebel, it is retributive. That is, it is a genuine punishment on Jezebel and others who refuse to repent.

[16 : 59] But it's also protective. Jezebel and her followers represented a deadly influence on others in the church. And so the Lord will remove that influence if he needs to.

But it also serves as a deterrent to others. Look on to the next sentence there in verse 23. 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. Word would have got around, not least because this very letter would have been read out in all the churches.

people would have heard about Jezebel, what happened to her. That Jesus is not going to be taken for a fool. He will know and take action when those threaten his church.

The seriousness of the punishment illuminates and reveals the seriousness of the sin. Jezebel was herself engaging it, but also encouraging others to partake in.

[18:07] The implicit warning to others as they saw what happened to her, as they read what happened. The implicit warning is stay clear of Jezebels in your own church.

If you have people like this, stay clear. And if you realize you've been sucked in, then repent right away. Repent. Two implications under our second point before we look at our final point.

Two implications. First, beware the self-appointed. Beware the self-appointed. Did you notice, as we were looking through the text, that this Jezebel, she's self-appointed.

She calls herself a prophetess. And in claiming to be a prophetess, she was claiming to be the mouthpiece of God. Come listen to me.

This is what God is saying. Now, no doubt, she was an articulate and persuasive woman. A powerful woman. But her authority is self-assigned.

[19:13] And it's leading others into sin. Her teaching was perverting God's right ordering of the world, wasn't it? She was encouraging idolatry, worshipping created things rather than a creator.

Sexual immorality. Sexual activity outside God's ordering of sex within marriage. She was encouraging both these things. Now, Christ's church does not recognize self-appointed leaders. So don't be taken in by them. Be slow to trust such people. Rather, trust those appointed by others. Take our church, for example.

The church is led by those who have been set apart by others, by ordained ministers and leaders.

Who've been recognized and set apart by others, by, in our case, the Didasco Presbytery.

So those ordained ministers are accountable to the presbytery. And so, if any of us step out of line and start, for example, teaching the things that Jezebel was teaching, well, they can and should and must be removed.

[20:25] Our authority will be removed by those who put us in that place in the first place. The self-appointed has no such accountability or authority. So be very careful with such self-appointed prophets who promise great insights, who promise new and exciting truths and teachings, people who say you can have it all, who say you can be a faithful Christian whilst embracing the world's idolatries, whilst enjoying sexual morality.

Be wary of such people. But the problem is, of course, that very often it is the very people who should be guarding a church against such things that actually promote these things.

Ordained ministers who promote sexual morality are happy to condone whatever new perversion the media elite is pushing. According to the latest best film at the Oscars, that's bestiality.

And given enough time, the churches that have towed the line on same-sex marriage will tow the line on that, I suspect, even that. Just read the National Church's Guidance on Transgender Issues published this week to get a sense of what ordained ministers are promoting.

So, yes, beware of the self-appointed, but be discerning too of those appointed by others. So, that's the first implication.

[21:57] Second, beware tolerating what shouldn't be tolerated. Remember that Jesus' rebuke here is primarily aimed at the church, not Jezebel.

Yes, Jesus unmasks Jezebel and details what she's been doing and the consequences of that for her and others if they refuse to repent. But Jesus takes issue with the church's toleration of her. Look at verse 20. But I have this against you that you tolerate that woman. That's the issue. It's their toleration of her.

So, the implication here is that there are people and teachings that the church shouldn't tolerate.

And through a failure to tackle Jezebel, this church was in effect endorsing her teaching.

How absolutely devastating for those in the church. Now, as a church, we must tolerate a lot. We must tolerate each other. That's quite something, isn't it?

[23:06] We're to put up with people that annoy us, who we don't naturally get on with, who we disagree with on certain issues. But we don't tolerate indiscriminately. It is not blanket toleration.

And that seems to be what has happened in Thyatira. Anything goes. But that is wrong. There are some things that we cannot tolerate.

Someone claiming to speak for God, who draws others into idolatry and sexual immorality, cannot be tolerated. So we need to be willing to be discerning, to discriminate.

Don't tolerate what shouldn't be tolerated. And that can be uncomfortable. It might mean challenging people, perhaps in public ways.

But sometimes that must be done. It was the case with Jezebel. It will be the case time to time in our church.

[24 : 10] So do not tolerate what shouldn't be tolerated. Well, there's two implications under that second point. Let's look thirdly now to our final point.

Churches that hold firm to Jesus until the end will inherit the earth. Jezebel urged the church in Thyatira to compromise in order to win temporary acceptance amongst the trade guilds and temporary economic benefit.

In contrast, Jesus urges the church to stand firm and so inherit the whole earth forever. This is mind-blowing stuff, isn't it?

Jesus says to his church, hold firm. Keep doing what you're doing. Don't tolerate Jezebel. keep at the main things and I will give you authority over the nations.

That's what he says there, isn't it? Verse 25 and 26. 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.

[25 : 27] Jesus draws back the curtains and again he shows us the big picture. He shows us where history is heading and it is truly mind-blowing.

Jesus is one day going to be given authority over the nations and his people, his church will join with him in that reign. There's language here that draws heavily on Psalm 2.

The Psalm about the foolish rebellion of the world's kings against the king of the universe who will one day bring about the consummation of his kingdom. And that kingdom, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, it does not come because the world welcomes his reign and evolves into the kingdom of God, no.

But it comes because Christ imposes his reign by force on rebellious people. So you can either be with me, he says, Jesus and reign with me over the nations or you can reject me, refusing to repent like Jezebel.

So fighting now for what is right, refusing to tolerate the Jezebels within the church now will be worth it one day. His sovereignty over every nation and every person will one day be fully visible, fully realized.

[26 : 54] Christ. But for now, as we wait for that day, we declare his sovereignty and urge people, appeal to people, command people to submit to his rule today whilst they still can, whilst God is patient.

to call out a Jezebel in the church, to refuse to tolerate someone like that in a church, that's not a comfortable thing to do, is it?

She was, in all likelihood, a very formidable woman with a considerable following within the congregation. But to challenge her, to cease tolerating her, that would undoubtedly lead to fallout and mess.

But do we see the seriousness of what she was really doing? It was so serious that Jesus was going to step in himself and take action if the church didn't.

He would strike her down and strike her children dead. Serious matters, aren't they? Serious because eternal matters, matters of eternity are in the balance.

[28 : 06] The consequences of leaving Jezebel unchallenged are far, far more serious than having to deal with a few unhappy and angry members of the church. So the Lord Jesus would urge his church today, he would urge you, if you find yourself in a place with a Jezebel, don't tolerate it.

Stand firm with Jesus because it will be worth it in the end. That is why he includes these verses at the end of this section, this letter. He shows them what's coming.

He shows them it will be worth it. Eternity is in view. Stand firm with Jesus. It will be worth it in the end. And he will give to those who stand firm.

He will give the morning star, his very self, the son of God, the king of the universe, lord of the nations. He will give himself to those who stand firm, who refuse to tolerate what should not be tolerated.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. Amen. Let us pray.

[29 : 38] Our Father God, you know your people. You have eyes like a flame of fire.

And Lord, you see through all that we do you know our hearts. You know your churches. And Lord, you are jealous for your church.

And Lord, you will do what is required to keep your church safe and growing. So Lord, please help us to take our part, to heed these words, these hard words, that we would be a people willing to discriminate, willing to not tolerate those who should not be tolerated.

Give us courage so that your church, your people may grow in devotion, may grow without hindrance in your works, your love, your faith, your service, your patience, endurance, and that we be a people who grow and stand firm in you.

Help us, Lord, to do that. Help us, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.