

Thyatira - A Church Lacking Discernment

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Well, we're coming now to our Bible reading, so please do grab your Bibles, turn to the very end of the Bible, to the book of Revelation, chapter 2. If you need a Bible, there are various different little piles of Bibles around the building. Do help yourself.

And a little bit later in the service, Paul will be preaching to us. And this evening we're going to be looking at the letter, this letter of the Lord Jesus to the church in Thyatira.

And they were a church lacking in discernment. So then let's read and hear what the Lord Jesus has to say to them.

Hear the word of the Lord. 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 works exceed the first.

[1 : 17] 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.

I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sick bed, 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 heart and mind. 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 to 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 : 59] He who has an ear, Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well please have Revelation chapter 2, And verses 18 to 29 open there in front of you.

And this is the fourth of these letters that we're considering this evening. The letter to Thyatira, the church in Thyatira. The Lord Jesus Christ cares for his precious church.

The Lord Jesus Christ is jealous for his church. And we see in chapter 1 that Jesus walks amongst his churches, Tending to them, Nurturing them, Caring for them.

He sees his churches for what they truly are. And so he knows exactly what they need to be told.

And these two chapters, chapters 2 and 3, They are Jesus' assessment of his churches.

These are real churches in modern day Turkey. And each of these letters addresses particular needs in each of the churches. Ephesus, the first one, Is theologically, morally sound, but deficient in love.

[4 : 32] Smyrna is vibrant, but fearful. Pergamon is witnessing, but compromising. Thyatira, as we'll see, is loving, but over-tolerant.

Sardis is impressive on the outside, but dead on the inside. Philadelphia is struggling, but strong. Laodicea is affluent, but apathetic.

And whilst these letters address real churches in the first century, They would have been read by all the churches at the time. Notice how each of the letters finishes.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Plural. So, what Jesus is saying to each particular church is not just relevant for that church only.

There is more general application to the church at large. But not just for church in the first century. These letters are of enduring relevance to the church in every age.

[5 : 40] And what is true of particular churches now, it may not be exactly what we read this evening. The church to Thyatira may not be exactly relevant right now to this church, but one day it will be.

So, these collection of seven letters, they are enduring relevance to the church today across all the world.

And Jesus knows exactly what his church needs to hear. He brings words of encouragement, but also words of rebuke.

Difficult, hard, bold words, like the words we'll read tonight in this letter. Very difficult words to hear. Not a comfortable read, is it?

But this is the Lord Jesus Christ addressing his church. And notice how Jesus is described in the very first verses of this letter. Look at verse 18.

[6 : 42] The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. His eyes are like fire.

He sees exactly what is going on. And he is prepared to say what his people need to hear, and what people are often not prepared to say.

Jesus says what is necessary. He says what is uncomfortable. He says what is true. So, let's look at what Jesus says to this church in Thyatira, and consider the implications for us today.

Three points. Number one, churches that are growing can still have serious blind spots. That's the first thing we see. Churches that are growing can have serious blind spots.

As with each of the letters we've seen so far, this begins with words of warm commendation. And the words here are words of high praise. Look at verse 19. Five particular things Jesus mentions.

[7 : 50] He says, I know your works, your love, and faith, and service, and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

Those are remarkable words of commendation, aren't they? How encouraging for the church to receive this letter, to hear these words of positive encouragement from the Lord Jesus.

I know your works. You're a church of love, faith, service, patient endurance. This is a church marked by real gospel growth.

There's lots to commend here about this church. Love, faith, service, patient endurance. These are marks of that church in Thyatira. They're making real progress.

Their latter works exceed the works at first. They're growing. They're making progress. Real contrast to the church in Ephesus, back in chapter 2, the start, which had abandoned what they were at first.

[8 : 55] Ephesus made a strong start, but they've gone astray. Ephesus was strong on doctrine, but weak on devotion. Thyatira, on the other hand, is a church growing, making progress.

Strong in devotion. The Lord Jesus knows this church. He commends them for it. And these are good things, and the Lord Jesus wants them to continue in these things, to keep going, to keep growing, to keep growing in their devotion.

But there is a danger in amongst all the encouragements, in amongst all the growth. The fact that the church was making progress did not mean that all was well.

Growth can often 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 that all's well.

We're growing. It's fine. We're making progress. There can't be major issues going on because we're growing, because we're a healthy church in some regards. There can be a sort of complacency.

[10 : 08] The warning here in Thyatira was that despite all the positive signs, all the encouragement, the growth, there were some major blind spots. And the Lord Jesus puts his finger on it.

And that can be true in all sorts of avenues of life, Connick. Growth can mask a disturbing reality. Think about a business with excellent growth.

The bottom line is very healthy indeed. But there's a key person high up in the organization who cannot manage his team well.

His team loathes him. They're not producing good results. But because the big picture is rosy, the chief executive hasn't grasped that nettle. He's not dealt with that particular individual because on

the whole, things are fine.

It's going well. But if left untackled, that's going to present a problem in the long run. His team will gradually drift away.

[11 : 10] They'll find better jobs. They'll be attracted by other places. And soon enough, that will hit the bottom line. You see, growth, healthy growth in an organization can mask. It can make you seem that everything's going okay.

It can mask the blind spots. And it can be like that with churches. The general picture can be very positive. Works, love, faith, service, patient endurance.

But real and significant issues are not tackled because either the growth has distracted the church or there's been a willingness to tackle big problems.

I don't want to ruin how things are going. I don't want to ruffle feathers. So I'll not deal with that.

Certain issues have been tolerated foolishly.

And that seems to be the situation here in Thyatira. There's real encouragements, but a big issue has not been tackled. There is positive growth in some aspects, but there's a major problem lurking. But Jesus sees it, Jesus names it, and Jesus deals with it.

[12 : 21] So that's the first thing. Growth can hide blind spots. It can mask serious problems.

Here's the second point.

That's where I spend most of our time this evening. Number two, churches must not tolerate people within the church who seduce others into sin.

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

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

This was a church abounding in devotion. We've seen that. But lacking in discernment. Their love, such as it was, seems to have been undiscerning and blindly affirming.

[13 : 31] Warm-heartedness had overtaken clear-mindedness. They were tolerant to the point of becoming dangerously undiscerning.

See, we need the right kind of tolerance in a church, not the wrong kind. Good tolerance means that a church is welcoming to all sorts of people.

All nationalities, backgrounds, levels of education, work, we welcome all. We welcome all to come and to hear the gospel because it's a call to all people everywhere to repent.

To turn from their sin and follow Christ and believe. All are welcome. But that doesn't mean that we throw out the right sort of discrimination out the window.

We do need to discriminate between truth and lies. We do need to discriminate. There are some things that we are not to tolerate. And in this letter, Jesus has no interest in inclusion that is so tolerant that it welcomes false teaching.

[14 : 45] Jesus has no interest in a diversity that is so tolerant that it allows for diverse views on idolatry and sexual immorality.

Jesus says that will not do. The problem in this letter, in this church, is that they tolerated someone they should not have tolerated. What's the issue?

We'll look at verse 20. He's just set out in verse 19 the positive things. But verse 20, Jesus says, 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.

It seems that people were engaging in similar sorts of behavior as in Pergamon, sexual immorality and idolatry.

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

[16 : 09] It was an individual within the church that was ruining others. They were tolerating a Jezebel, says Jesus. Now that could have been her actual name.

But at the very least, I think Jesus is referring to a well-known Old Testament character called Jezebel. In the 9th century BC, Jezebel was an unbelieving princess from Sidon.

And Israel's king Ahab had married Jezebel for all sorts of political reasons. It was an unwise match. But Jezebel, an unbelieving princess from Sidon, marries Israel's king.

And she brought with her her false gods. And pretty soon, pagan priests had spread the worship of Baal and Asherah all throughout the land of Israel.

God's people were seduced by the idea that these Sidonian gods, which Jezebel had brought with her, they thought that they would bring economic prosperity.

[17 : 27] Jezebel's idolatry, which involved ritual prostitution, pagan shrines that swept across the land. And pretty soon, the flagpoles were flying a new flag in Israel.

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's doing, it's an indication as to what sort of influence this person was.

This second Jezebel, this Jezebel in Thyatira, she was doing the very same thing that Jezebel in the 9th century BC was doing. She was encouraging Christians there in Thyatira to engage in sexual morality and idolatry.

And particularly in Thyatira, it was a city known for its economic trade guilds. You had all these different guilds around the place.

There would be the, I don't know, the bricklaying guild, there would be the carpentry guild. But the thing that was common about these guilds was the sorts of things that happened when they met.

[18 : 39] These were known to be places of sexual immorality. And Jezebel here in Thyatira, she seemingly is encouraging Christians there to be engaged in this sort of activity.

These activities that are part and parcel of economic life there in Thyatira, she was saying it's okay to do that. She seems to have convinced the Christians in the church that their faith in Jesus Christ didn't exclude them from the trade guild idolatries that would guarantee their economic well-being. It's a very seductive message for the Christians there in Thyatira. It was a message that said, you can have it both ways. You can follow Christ, and you can also be part of this stuff that's going on in Thyatira.

Those things can coexist. You're not compromising your faith if you do this. She was teaching them sexual morality and idolatry are okay. Jezebel made Christianity seem easier, less costly, less countercultural.

You can enjoy all the blessings of being a Christian whilst fully engaging in these pagan rituals and immoralities. It was a very dangerous message.

[20 : 10] And she seems to have drawn in Christians there in the church in Thyatira. It's very serious.

The kind of things that she was doing. Just notice how it's described later on. Look at verse 24. Jesus says, 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, that is how Jesus characterizes what this woman is teaching.

These are things of Satan. This is serious. And look at what Jesus will do to her and those who follow her.

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

[21 : 37] He is gracious and patient. He does give time for his wayward people, for a wayward individuals to repent. But there does come a time when he will say, No more, no longer.

No longer will I wait. And for Jezebel, that time had come. She's refused to repent.

And the Lord Jesus promises here to throw her onto a sickbed, verse 22. And let's just 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've behaved in Jezebelian sorts of ways.

No, the vast majority of sickness that we endure in this world is because we live in a fallen world. A world suffering under the curse. Some, of course, is caused by our own foolish decisions.

[22 : 44] But what this is saying is that sometimes and especially, well, certainly with the case of Jezebel, the Lord will bring someone down.

He will bring them to their sickbed because of unrepentant, destructive sin that threatens his church and his people. That's what's happening here with Jezebel.

This is a judgment that is retributive, that is a genuine punishment on Jezebel and others who refuse to repent. But it's also protective.

See, Jezebel and those who are involved with her, they represent a deadly influence on others in the church. And so the Lord will remove that influence if he needs to.

See, Jesus loves his church. He will protect his church. And to do that here in Thyatira, he's going to have to take Jezebel out of the game. He's going to throw her on a sickbed.

[23 : 50] So this judgment, this throwing onto the sickbed, it's retributive, it's protective, but it's also something of a deterrent to others. Look at the next sentence there in verse 23.

He's going to throw her on a sickbed. And verse 23, I will strike her children dead and the church will know that I'm he who searches mind and heart. And I will give to each of you according to your works.

Jesus' judgment on this woman, it is going to serve as a very stern warning, isn't it, to others. Look what happens.

Word will have gone around, not least, because this letter would have been read out, not just in Thyatira, but the other churches would have read this letter. They would have seen the warning to Jezebel.

They would have heard what happened to her. And the seriousness of the punishment illuminates. It reveals the seriousness of the sin that Jezebel was engaging in.

[24 : 57] This was not a light matter. This was deadly serious. And the implicit warning to others is to stay well clear from Jezebels in your own church.

If you realize you've been sucked in by what they've been teaching, then you must repent straight away. This is very dangerous teaching within the church.

This isn't an external problem here. This was somebody within. Their own number who is drawing others away into sexual immorality, into idolatry.

Two implications just to consider under the second point. First is to beware the self-appointed. Did you notice that we read as we went through the text that Jezebel is self-appointed.

She calls herself a prophetess. Middle of verse 20. She calls herself a prophetess. She's teaching and seducing my servants. She's claiming big things for herself by giving herself that title.

[26 : 11] In claiming to be a prophetess, she is claiming to speak for God. She is claiming authority. Come, listen to me. I am revealing to you what God says.

That's her claim. No doubt she was articulate, persuasive. But her authority is self-assigned and it's leading others into sin.

Her teaching was perverting God's right ordering of the world. She was teaching idolatry, worshiping created things rather than worshiping the creator.

She was teaching sexual immorality, sexual activity outside of God's ordering of sex within marriage. That was what she was encouraging and teaching. These things are okay.

But Christ's church doesn't recognize self-appointed leaders. So do not be taken in by them.

[27 : 13] That's part of the warning of this passage. Beware self-appointed teachers and leaders in the church. Be very slow to trust such people.

Rather, you are to trust those appointed by others. But in reality, isn't it so often the opposite that we observe?

So often, our ears delight to hear what self-appointed leaders say. Our ears delight to listen to people we really ought not to listen to.

And we often distrust those who have been put in leadership over the church. Those who have been set apart as God's under-shepherds, it doesn't take much to distrust, does it?

And maybe that's something that's happening there in Thyatira. Jezebel, she's getting a hearing. she's gaining trust. But those who have been set apart as leaders, not so much.

[28 : 26] Authority, it flows from those who have been set apart by others, not self. So, for example, in our congregation, our church is led by ordained ministers and leaders who have been recognized and set apart by others.

in our cases, by our presbytery, the Dadasco Fellowship. So, those of us who are ordained in this church are accountable to that presbytery.

If any of us step out of line, if we start teaching the sorts of things that Jezebel is teaching, then we would expect others in the presbytery to come along and remove us.

because we are overstepping. We are not holding firm to the gospel. The self-appointed have no such authority.

They have no such accountability. So, beware the self-appointed. They may not go around calling themselves a prophetess or a prophet. They may not go around giving themselves a title, but in reality, are they starting to teach and hold authority over other people?

[29 : 39] Are they having influence? They should not have. So, just be careful. Be careful with self-appointed prophets who promise great insights, who promise new and exciting teachings and truths.

People who say you can have it all. Who say you can be a faithful Christian whilst embracing this world's idolatries. You can be a faithful Christian and enjoy sexual immorality.

You can be a faithful Christian and embrace your LGBT identity. Observe that in corners of the evangelical church.

It's coming. Beware the self-appointed. That's the first implication. Second, beware tolerating what shouldn't be tolerated.

this is the key issue here. The church there was over tolerance. They were not discerning. And remember that Jesus' rebuke here is primarily aimed at the church, not Jezebel.

[30 : 48] This is a message to the church and what they have done and failed to do. Yes, Jesus unmask Jezebel. He 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 Jezebel. It is the church's tolerance that's the problem. Notice verse 20, but I have this against you.

You tolerate that woman Jezebel. That is the target of Jesus' rebuke here. The church have tolerated. So the implication here is that there are people and teachings that the church should not tolerate.

Through a failure to tackle Jezebel, the church was in effect endorsing her teaching. By not taking issue with it, it was complicit.

It's devastating. Now as a church, we must tolerate a lot. We must tolerate each other.

[32 : 00] That's plenty to tolerate, isn't it? We are to put up with people that annoy us, who we don't naturally get on with, people who support Man City, things like that.

we might disagree on a whole range of issues, but we don't tolerate indiscriminately. It is not blanket toleration.

And that seems to have been the approach in Thyatira. Anything goes. We tolerate everyone.

We're not going to discriminate. We'll just let everything go. 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.

Some beliefs and behaviors are not to be affirmed. When you don't love what Jesus loves, when you don't hate what Jesus hates, you don't want the real Jesus.

[33 : 08] You actually want a Jesus of your own imagining, of your own creation, and invented Jesus. Jezebel had and invented Jesus. A Jesus who let all sorts of things go that clearly Jesus in His Word does not allow.

So we must discriminate. We must not tolerate certain things. And it's not me or you to decide what those things are.

God's Word itself determines what is within the bounds of orthodoxy and what isn't. The Bible itself tells us what we are to tolerate and what we are not to tolerate.

And what Jezebel was doing here was not to be tolerated. We need to be willing to discriminate. tolerate. Don't tolerate what shouldn't be tolerated.

And that's not easy. In our world, in our culture, it's not an easy thing to draw lines, to say no. And it may not be an individual person within the church like it is here in Thyatira.

[34 : 22] It may not be one particular individual, but it may be a certain set of ideas that have been allowed to captivate a number within the fellowship. Unclear thinking around the cult of pride and identity that pervades our culture.

There are voices in the wider evangelical church that would seek to move us ever so gently, ever so subtly towards more affirming language.

A distortion of the gospel, and a call to repent from sinful desires, whatever form they take. There are those who would urge us to soften our language on those things.

We cannot be undiscerning about what we hear in the wider world. And that is why we've encouraged folk to read this book over the summer, *Pride* by Matthew Roberts.

He identifies some of these cultures in the wider evangelical world on these very issues of sexual immorality and idolatry. He pulls it together very healthy.

[35 : 35] If you've not read it, grab a copy, have a look. That's exactly the kind of thing that we're warned about there in that book. We don't shift our theology with the culture.

relationship. We hold the line. We don't tolerate what God commands us we shouldn't be tolerating. It's okay, we get that. Happens to the best of us. So that's the second major implication of this chapter.

Beware the self-appointed, but beware tolerating what we shouldn't tolerate. We must discriminate. We can't tolerate everything. Be discriminating, be discerning.

Finally, our third point, churches that hold firm to Jesus until the end will inherit the earth.

[36 : 48] So secondly, we must not tolerate people within the church who seduce others into sin. Number three, churches that hold firm to Jesus until the end will inherit the earth.

This is verse 24 and following. Jesus, gives us the motivation and the perspective for holding the line.

What we're asked to do in terms of discrimination and discernment is not easy. It's not easy. To deal with a Jezebel in a church could prove explosive.

It's not an easy thing to tackle these things. But in this last part of the letter, Jesus gives us the perspective we need. He gives us the motivation we need. To hold firm.

To hold the line. And there's a great contrast. You see, Jezebel urged the church in Thyatira to compromise in order to win temporary acceptance and approval from the surrounding culture.

[37 : 53] There was economic benefit perhaps in Thyatira to what Jezebel was encouraging. Jesus, on the other hand, urges the church to stand firm and so inherit the whole earth forever.

That's what we see at the end of this letter. Temporary benefits of Jezebel or eternal benefits of Jesus. And what we see here is mind-blowing.

Just read with me from verse 24. verse 24.

Jesus, even as I myself have received authority from my Father and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

This is mind-blowing. Jesus says to his church, hold firm, keep doing what you're doing, do not tolerate Jezebel, keep at the main things and I will give you authority over the nations.

[39 : 21] Jesus is again drawing back the curtain on what we see now and he's showing us an eternal perspective. He's showing us the big picture and he shows us where history is headed and it's astonishing.

Jesus is one day going to be given authority over the nations and his people, his church, he says, will join him in that.

We will join him in that reign over the nations one day. And the language here, it draws heavily on Psalm 2, a psalm about the foolish rebellion of this world's kings against the king of the universe, who will one day bring about the consummation of his kingdom.

kingdom. And that kingdom, the kingdom of our Lord and Christ, doesn't come because the world welcomes his reign, necessarily, but it comes because Christ imposed his reign by force on rebellious people.

Jesus is king, he is judge, he's returning one day and every knee will bow. They'll have to. And Jesus says, you can either be with me, you can reign over the nations, or you can reject me, you can refuse to repent like Jezebel.

[40 : 49] Those are the options in front of you. And Jesus' sovereignty over every nation and over every person will one day be fully visible, will be fully realized.

But for now, as we wait for that day, we declare his sovereignty. We urge people, we appeal to people, we command people to submit to his rule today, whilst they still can, whilst God is patient. That's the perspective Jesus paints for us here at the end of this letter. He shows where eternity is going and he says to his people, you will reign with me one day, you will rule over the nations. Make your choice. Will you go with Jezebel or will you stand with me? And we need that perspective, don't we?

We need the perspective that Jesus gives us here at the end of this letter. To call out a Jezebel, to refuse to tolerate someone like that in the church, that is not a comfortable thing to do.

[42 : 04] It's hard. This Jezebel was likely a very formidable person. She will the power, influence. To challenge her, to cease tolerating her, well it would have led to fallout, a mess and difficult conversations I'm sure.

But as we've seen she was inventing her own Jesus. A Jesus that let her and others follow the desires of their hearts. And that is serious.

So serious that Jesus was going to step in and take action if the church didn't. he would strike her down. And the consequence of leaving a Jezebel unchallenged are far more serious than having to deal with a handful of unhappy and angry members of the church.

Jesus urges his church then and today to take action. When there are people in amongst his fellowship pulling people into idolatry and sexual morality, Jesus says you must stand firm. you must not tolerate that. Stand firm with Jesus and it will be worth it in the end. Look what I will give you. The nations.

[43 : 27] And so the question Jesus poses is do you want to fit in with this world, with Jezebel, or do you want Christ? Which is it?

He will give you He will give the morning star, He will give His very self, the Son of God, the King of the universe, the Lord of the nations.

He will give you Himself. You will reign with Him forever. Jezebel, well her days are numbered.

Lord, we must not tolerate what Jesus commands us not to tolerate.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Let me pray. Father, we thank you that you love your church.

We thank you that you care for your church enough to give us hard warnings and help us to be a people that live by faith, that trust you.

[44 : 50] Give us courage. Give us backbone so that we would be a church rich in devotion and love, but also a church that are willing to rightly discriminate, that we would love the Lord Jesus enough to be intolerant of that which we must not tolerate.

Lord, help us. Please give us wisdom. Give us courage that we would stand with you now and forever.

Help us, Lord, to follow you, we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen.