

## **“She Refuses to Repent” (Revelation 2:18–29)**

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There are always two great threats to Christianity. One comes from outside the church. This is the kind of threat we would expect. People who don't claim to be Christians are often threatened by the church's witness and want to stop Christianity from spreading. We see this often in totalitarian states. In many cases, large governments have tried to put pressure on the church. If they weren't threatened, they wouldn't bother to refute the claims of Christians. They wouldn't try to silence Christians. But the claim that Jesus is the true Lord, the true King, always challenges those outside the church.

The other threat to Christianity is the threat inside the church. And this may be the greater threat. Those who claim to be Christians have often distorted the faith by acting contrary to the doctrines of Christianity and/or by altering those doctrines to fit their desires and behaviors. Churches have often failed to act according to the faith. Certainly, Christian leaders have failed to practice what they have preached. And churches have often distorted their doctrines to fit with the times. Many who are called “pastor” are false teachers. If every institution that calls itself a church were to commit to biblical doctrine and to doing their best to live according to those teachings, the world would be quite different.

Today, as we continue to study the book of Revelation, we will see Jesus address a church that was doing some things very well. But they tolerated a false teacher who was leading them astray. Jesus cares about our actions, and he cares about what is taught in his church. In fact, what we do is often related to what we teach and believe. Jesus wants a pure church.

This morning, we're going to read Revelation 2:18–29. This is the fourth message that Jesus gives to a church in this book of Revelation. Each church in the book of Revelation seems to represent a type of church that we still see today. We want to be sure that we represent what is good in these churches and that we avoid what Jesus condemns in these churches.

Without further ado, here are the words of Jesus:

<sup>18</sup>“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.

<sup>19</sup>“I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup> I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Only hold fast what you have until I come. <sup>26</sup> The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, <sup>27</sup> and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. <sup>28</sup> And I will give him the morning star. <sup>29</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”<sup>1</sup>

It is helpful to know something about each of the seven cities that Jesus addresses in Revelation. All of these cities were in Asia Minor, a province of the Roman Empire. This area of the world is what we would now call western Turkey. Thyatira might have been the least important of these cities, at least politically. But it was known for having a large number of trade guilds. There were guilds for various trades or crafts. Merchants, tanners, bakers, those who worked with textiles and metals, and others were part of these guilds. I’m not sure that these would be the equivalent of modern unions, but there is some similarity. Perhaps they were more like various modern associations that people in different professions join for the purpose of networking. Most workers were part of these guilds. And each guild had its own god or goddess. To be a guild member in good standing, you would be expected to attend the various feasts dedicated to these gods and goddesses. You would be expected to offer some sign of worship to them. If you didn’t, you would likely lose out on business opportunities.

In a way, this might be like being part of a trade organization, a union, or some other professions association today. To join some groups, you have to indicate that you share their values and beliefs. To be a member in good standing, you would be expected to share the right political views and the right views on ethical and moral issues. When I say “right,” I don’t mean that these views are correct. I mean that if you join the group, you would be expected to share the views of that group, the views that that group considered to be right. If you don’t accept such views, you might be removed from the group or even lose your job. At the least, you will have a hard time getting along with others in your profession. For example, if you are a professor at a

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

college, you are expected to share the beliefs and values of that college. In secular schools, that often means you embrace the values of what the so-called left. If you are a conservative, you might not lose your job (especially if you have secured tenure), but you will be pressured and marginalized. Or, to use another example, if you work for certain businesses, you might be pressured to celebrate things you don't want to. There was a story last year of a woman who used to work for Starbucks as a barista. She claims she was fired because she refused to wear a t-shirt that celebrated LGBTQ Pride. She refused to wear the shirt because of her religious beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

So, if you were a Christian in Thyatira, and you made and sold clothing, you might be pressured to join a guild. And if you didn't, because you didn't want to worship that guild's god or goddess, you might lose customers. And even if you weren't part of a guild, there would be pressure to join in the idolatry of the city. The main god worshiped in Thyatira was Apollo, the sun god and the son of Zeus.

This is the location of the church that Jesus addresses in this message.

As always, Jesus is described using words that we heard in the first chapter of Revelation. In verse 18, we're told that he is "the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze." Jesus is indeed the Son of God. As the Son of God, he has always existed. He is the one through whom God the Father created the universe. Yet over two thousand years ago, he also became a human being, to rescue sinners from condemnation. The fact that Jesus is called the Son of God here might be a critique of Apollo, a supposed son of a god. It might also be criticism of the Roman Emperor. At some point before Jesus was born, emperors started to be viewed as divine, usually after they died, though at the time Revelation was written, the current Emperor, Domitian, called himself a god. There is a letter from Caesar Augustus, the emperor at the time Jesus was born, to Ephesus that begins with these words: "Emperor Caesar, son of the god Julius."<sup>3</sup> Jesus, in calling himself the Son of God, might be saying, "Unlike Apollo and Caesar, I'm the true Son of God."

In the first chapter, we were told that Jesus had eyes like fire and feet like bronze. The flaming eyes represent the fact that Jesus sees all. The judge of the world's bright eyes search everywhere, seeing everything. The burnished bronze is probably a representation of being

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/starbucks-barista-says-she-was-fired-refusing-wear-pride-shirt-n1248847>.

<sup>3</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1997), 202.

refined, of being pure. Jesus sees what is happening in his churches and he wants his churches to be pure.

Jesus begins his message with a commendation. In verse 19, he says, “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.” This church was doing good works. It seems like they were the opposite of the church in Ephesus. That church had good theology, but it had lost its love for God and failed to do the works that it had been doing before (Rev. 2:4–5). When we looked at the message to the church in Ephesus, I had said that the church probably had failed to evangelize. Perhaps the church in Thyatira was telling people about Jesus. They might also have done things like care for the physical needs of the people in and outside the church. What we do know is that they were busy, and their more recent works were greater than their previous works. Jesus commends these things.

But, as is the case with most of these churches, Jesus has some harsh criticism. In verse 20, he 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.” Jesus says that there is a woman who falsely calls herself a prophetess, and she is leading people in the church astray. The woman was surely not literally named Jezebel. Throughout the book of Revelation, there are countless references to the Old Testament. Just as we heard about Balaam last week, we hear about Jezebel this week. In the Old Testament, there was a real Jezebel, who was the wife of Ahab, one of the kings of Israel. You can read about her in 1 and 2 Kings. She was a Gentile, not from Israel. She was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of the Sydonians (1 Kgs. 16:31). Ethbaal means “Baal is alive.” Baal was one of the gods of Canaan, and Jezebel led Ahab and Israel to worship Baal. Jezebel is known for being an idol-worshiper, as someone who had many false prophets (1 Kgs. 18:19), who killed true prophets (1 Kgs. 18:4, 13), and who wanted to kill the prophet Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:1–2). In calling the false prophetess in Thyatira “Jezebel,” Jesus is saying that she is like that idolatrous queen who lived hundreds of years earlier.

Just another quick comment: Sometimes you hear people say the Bible is misogynistic, or against women. But notice that in some cases, the false teachers are men. The apostle Paul referred to men who were supposed apostles (2 Cor. 11:13). In this case, it happened to be a woman who was leading people astray. Both men and women sin. Both men and women can

teach false things. Both men and women can be saved from condemnation, reconciled to God through Jesus. And both men and women will be condemned.

Now, what was this woman leading Christians in Thyatira to do? She was leading them to commit idolatry. She was probably saying that Christians could worship Jesus and worship idols, or at least attend the feasts to these gods and goddesses that were held in the city. She must have taught that one can be a Christian and do what everyone else in the city did in terms of sex. The sexual immorality mentioned here might have been sexual practices associated with idolatry.

As I said last week, idolatry and sexual immorality often go hand-in-hand. God made us to know him, to love him, to be like him, to serve him, and to obey him. He made us to worship him and him alone. We are supposed to have a faithful, exclusive relationship with God. But our tendency is to make all kinds of false gods our object of worship. We can view ourselves as the center of reality. We can make our jobs the center of our lives. We can put all our hopes in a romantic relationship or in money. We try to find comfort in the world's entertainments. We do all this instead of loving and trusting God supremely. In the Bible, idolatry is likened to adultery. We're cheating on God when we worship false gods. Literally, the Bible often says that people "whored" after other gods. But literal sexual immorality has often been associated with idolatry. In the pagan Roman Empire, sex was incorporated into worship of gods and goddesses at temples. And people have often elevated sex to a god-like status in their lives. According to the Bible, sex is a good gift given to us from God. Sex is supposed to be appreciated only in the context of marriage, the exclusive, loving, faithful union of one man and one woman.

But sex was misused in that day, just as it is misused and abused in our day. I think the reason why sexual sin is so prevalent is that we tend to have an ethic of "if it feels good, do it." A right view of ethics would be to understand everything with reference to God. A right view of what is good and bad for us to do, morally speaking, would be to understand how God has designed things, and then to obey his commands. But when people get away from the standard of God and his word, they use some other standard to evaluate their moral practices. So, good and bad are viewed as what is pleasurable and what causes pain. Now, often what does cause pain is bad for us. We generally shouldn't cause others pain. But sometimes what is good for us is a bit painful, or at least uncomfortable. Surgery can be painful. For some, getting the COVID-19 vaccine has caused some pain. Sometimes, exercising can be an unpleasant feeling. These things are good for us, however. And we know that what feels good can often be bad for us. Eating

certain foods feels good because we like the way they taste, the way they feel in our mouths, and we like the feeling of having a full stomach. But certain foods that feel good to eat can be very bad for us. I'm sure that drugs must feel good, but we all know that drugs are destructive. So, what feels good is not always good for us. Often, we can't see the immediate destructive effects of what feels good. But over time, sometimes many years later, we can see that certain choices we make become our ruin.

That is important to think about in our day, especially with the rampant sexual immorality that we see around us. We see all kinds of misuse and abuse of sex, practices that are contrary to God's design. And the misuse of sex leads to broken people: broken relationships, a lack of real love, intimacy, and trust, a great deal of shame, and, in some cases, disease. Going against the warp and woof of creation is costly. God wants us to have what is best. In our rebellion against God, we think we know better. We're attracted to immediate and cheap thrills. But those thrills can destroy us. So, God calls us to repentance.

It seems that this false prophetess was called to repentance. In verse 21, Jesus said he gave this woman time to repent, and she did not. Perhaps a church leader had warned her. Jesus had given her time to change her ways, and she refused to listen. She refused to repent, to turn back to God. God is merciful to us all. He could have condemned us already, but he didn't. He gives us time and opportunities to turn back to him. But if we die before repenting, we will be condemned. We do not want to end our lives in rebellion against God, though we understand that some do. Those who die in that condition will be judged by God.

In verses 22 and 23, Jesus says that he will judge this woman. He will "throw her onto a sickbed." She will die. And those who were following her ways will be judged, "unless they repent of her works." Jesus will strike her "children"—probably her followers—dead. And this serves as a warning. Jesus says, "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." Jesus knows our minds and our hearts. He knows not only what we do, but what we think and desire. And we will be judged for such things. Jesus will give to each of us according to our works.

The concept of judgment in Christianity is a bit complex. Clearly, those who do not confess their sins and put their trust in Jesus will be condemned. They will be judged for their works. They will have no excuse on that great day of judgment. There will be no place for them to hide. We also know that Christians are saved not because they have earned a right status with

God, but because of what Jesus has done for us. The Bible is clear that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23), and even one sin deserves condemnation (James 2:10; Rom. 6:23). Christians are no better than non-Christians in that regard. Our sin is so bad that it took nothing less than the miracle of the Son of God becoming a human and dying to bear the penalty for our sins that we deserve to save us. And that is how we are saved. Jesus lived the perfectly righteous life that we should live. If we trust him, we are credited with his righteousness. And Jesus bore the penalty that we deserve. If we trust in him, there is no future condemnation for us. We are forgiven. Our sins are wiped away. We are reconciled by God, adopted into his family, given the promise of eternal life.

But if we're Christians, our lives should be different. We should live for God. To put it differently: how we live demonstrates whether we are Christians or not. Our works, whatever we're doing, bear witness that we are in Christ or apart from him. Are we truly living for Jesus? Are we obedient to him? Jesus knows. There is no fooling him.

Jesus warns those who have yet to follow this "Jezebel." He says, in verses 24 and 25, "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." He encourages them not to follow this false prophetess. She probably thought she was teaching "the deep things of God," but she was actually teaching the "deep things of Satan." Jesus tells the true Christians to avoid this false teaching and to hold fast to the truth.

The church would do well to pay attention to this word from Jesus. There are people today who think they can move beyond what the Bible clearly says. They often appeal to their own personal spiritual experience. Some might even say, "God told me . . ." But if what they believe and teach doesn't line up with God's word, the Bible, they are not teaching the deep things of God. They are teaching the deep things of Satan. When people say that the biblical authors got sex and marriage and gender wrong, they are not teaching the things of God. Jesus tells such people to repent. I am reminded of what we read in 2 John 9: "Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son." Those who are true Christians will stick to the truth.

Jesus also gives some encouragement to those Christians who are faithful. He says this, in verses 26–29:

<sup>26</sup>The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, <sup>27</sup>and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. <sup>28</sup>And I will give him the morning star. <sup>29</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

We conquer by holding fast to Jesus. We don't conquer by being sinless. I don't think that's possible in this life. But we conquer by believing in the only sinless person who has ever lived. We hold to his teachings. We don't compromise, we don't worship idols. If we don't give in to the pressures outside of the church and the false teachings that sometimes invade the church, we conquer. And if we do that, Jesus promises us that will rule with him. The language of having authority over nations, ruling them with a rod of iron, and dashing certain "pots" comes from Psalm 2:8–9. That Psalm is about the Messiah, Jesus. Jesus is the one who will rule all the nations with an iron rod. That is clear from other passages in Revelation that we'll look at later (Rev. 12:5; 19:15). Also, Jesus is called the morning star in Revelation 22:16. And this is likely a reference back to Numbers 24:17, a prophecy regarding Jesus' coming. Here, Jesus says that those who cling to him will share in his rule. That is a tremendous promise. Humble, faithful Christians will one day rule the world.

Perhaps we can think of this promise in these terms: Those who now come under the rule of Jesus, those who learn to rule their passions now, will someday rule the world with Jesus. If you refuse to be ruled, if you refuse to follow the perfect King, and if you refuse to rule over all the desires that you experience, some of which are destructive, then you are not qualified to rule. Those who reject Jesus' authority, by rejecting him outright or by rejecting his teachings, will not rule. They will be dashed into pieces by Jesus' rod of iron.

That may sound harsh, but Jesus will judge because he loves. Jesus loves the truth. He loves purity. He loves his church. He does not want it to be tainted by sin and false teaching. Jesus cares about our behaviors and our beliefs, our deeds and our doctrines. Jesus knows that bad deeds are destructive. He knows the false teachings lead people astray. Jesus will not put up with false teachers forever.

Let me speak first to those who are not yet Christians. If you do not know Jesus as your King, it is likely because you don't want him to be your ultimate authority. You may not like the idea that some of your desires are destructive. But history shows us that what feels good in the moment is often bad for us. Consider the fact that you do not have flaming eyes of fire that see

everything. You cannot search the hearts and minds of everyone. In fact, I think we can't even know our own hearts perfectly. We are not the arbiters of truth. We do not decide what is right and wrong. We simply don't have that authority and power, nor do we have that knowledge and wisdom. We cannot fix the world. We have yet to solve the universal problems of hate, greed, lust, war, and death, among many others. Our lives are but a mist. It would be foolish to reject Jesus' rule in an attempt to rule our own lives. Jesus has given you time to repent, to turn to him. He has given you an opportunity to repent. He has given you *this* opportunity, right now, to turn to him. Trust in Jesus today. If you need to know more about him, please talk to me.

If you are a Christian, hold fast to Jesus. Hold fast to the truth about Jesus. Hold fast to his commands. Don't be fooled by those who claim they know the deep things of God. If you can't find those deep things in the Bible, they're not from God. They are the deep things of Satan. Don't think that we have come to know better than God. Truth never goes out of date. There is no expiration date on God's revelation. Hold fast to the truth. Encourage others to do the same. Don't follow your feelings or experiences. Those things aren't authoritative and normative. Follow God's word. If you do, he will give you authority to rule with him.