

Church That Tolerated False Teachers and Sin

We have now studied the messages written to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum in Revelation 2-3. In the message to the church in Ephesus, the church was warned to repent because it had left its first love. In the message to the church in Pergamum, Jesus warned it to repent because some held to false doctrine and sin. Our study today is about the church in Thyatira. It was warned because it tolerated a false teacher resulting in some of the congregation worshiping idols and sexual sins. This is the strongest rebuke from Jesus so far. This means that three out of the four messages, or seventy-five percent of the churches in Revelation 2 were rebuked because they were content with sin in the congregation!

JESUS SPEAKS TO THE PASTOR OF THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA. Our study is in Revelation 2:18-29. Here is verse 18,

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this . . . Revelation 2:18 (NASB)



Once again, the term “angel” refers to the pastor of the church. This message is then addressed to the pastor of the church. When we are told the “Son of God” is speaking, we know immediately that Jesus is the speaker. We are also told that the speaker has “eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like bur-

nished bronze.” Revelation 1:14-15 also confirms that Jesus is the speaker since it refers to Jesus as having “eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze.” So, this message is from Jesus, to the apostle John, to the pastor, who would then communicate it to the leaders and the congregation.

The church was in the ancient city of Thyatira, which was a small, unimportant town located in Asia Minor about 45 miles southeast of Pergamum and near the Hermus River. Today those ruins are almost non-existent. Maybe the most significant ruins are those of a road and some broken ancient marble columns.

The city was primarily a place of merchants and craftsmen. Sir William Ramsay states that there were at least ten guilds in the city: wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-traders

and bronze-smiths.¹ Acts 16:14 tells us about a woman named Lydia, who was visiting the city of Philippi in Greece, and she met the apostle Paul there. We are told that she was from the city of Thyatira and that she was a seller of purple

fabrics (one of the guilds), and a worshiper of God. In Acts 16:14-15 we are also told that God used the apostle Paul to lead her to saving faith in Christ. Then her household became Christians and were baptized. Therefore, it is very likely that she went back to Thyatira where God used her to lead others to

1. William M Ramsay, The Letters to the Seven Churches, Baker Book House, 1985 reprint of 1904, p. 324-325.

saving faith in Jesus. As a result, a church was started.

History tells us that the city was seriously committed to the worship of the goddess Artemis and the god Apollo. Artemis was her Greek name, and Diana was her Roman name. Artemis was the goddess of hunting and childbirth. Apollo was the god of music, poetry, art, archery, medicine, sun, light, and knowledge. There may have been other pagan gods and goddesses who were worshiped in the city, but the historical record is incomplete. The point of this historical sketch is that this was a real church, with real people in a real city.

The message to the church in Thyatira can be outlined as praise (v. 19), problems (v. 20-23), personal response (v. 24-25), and promises (v. 26-29). There are also four major applications in our study.

PRaise OF THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA. As we have seen in every message that Jesus has written to the churches so far, it starts with praise. Verse 19 begins the praise.

I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.
Revelation 2:19 (NASB)

Once again, Jesus said, “I know.” As we have learned before, this means that Jesus has known about this church for some time. He has been watching them. He has been and is watching every church and He is watching our church. The Greek word for “deeds” just refers to accomplishments. They had great accomplishments as a church, whatever they were. The Greek word for “love” is *agape*, revealing that this congregation really loved each other and their visitors. Their example is a good one for us. We should look for visitors every Sunday. Repeatedly let them know that we care about them and do the same for each other. We often think that “hospitality” refers to having people into our homes, but the Greek word literally means “stranger-love.” That is, those who love strangers will invite people into their homes. “Faith” refers to trusting God. We are not to worry, fear, doubt or be anxious, but to have great faith in our loving God. Then Jesus praised them for their service. This is the first time that Jesus mentioned “service” in any of these messages. The Greek word for “service” is *diakonia*, which refers to serving or helping one another. It is important

to know that a biblical definition of humility is serving others (Philippians 2:8). Proud people do not serve others. They just want to be served. “Perseverance” refers to the fact that they kept doing these things and did not stop. Then we are told that their most recent deeds were greater than the old ones. Now, we do not know to what the “deeds of late” refer, but the message is this church worked together, loved one another, helped one another and did not grow weary in the process. They were committed to these things. This was a very friendly and committed church, but something was wrong in this church!

PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA. We can be sure that the people in this congregation thought the pastor and the leaders of the church were spiritual men. It is the unusual person who wants to go to a Christian church where the pastor and leaders are committing some sin or failing in their leadership roles. But verse 20 reveals the problems in this church. Jesus says,

But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. Revelation 2:20 (NASB)

The False Teacher Jezebel. This verse reveals four serious problems in this church! The first problem was that the pastor and leaders tolerated a false teacher. Why did I say the pastor and church leaders? Because verse 20 says that Jesus said, “I have this against you,” He was addressing the pastor, which would include the church leaders. The Greek word that is translated as “tolerate” literally means “to send from.” We could say the pastor and the leaders of the church “had sent her from” them. They had released control of her. They just let her teach whatever she wanted to teach. Most likely she enjoyed that freedom. Maybe they did not check what she believed before letting her teach. In some churches today a prospective teacher has to take a biblical exam to demonstrate that they know Scripture and theology. Some churches require that prospective teachers attend a teacher training class and then demonstrate proficiency. The first problem was that the church had released control of her. They did nothing after discovering she was a false teacher. They tolerated her!

A Woman Teacher. The second problem was that the false teacher was a woman. In 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul says,

But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. 1 Timothy 2:12 (NASB)

In Judaism a boy became a man when he reached the age of 13 years. The Greek word for “man” in this verse is *aner*. It refers to a male adult. It is generally believed this false teacher was teaching both males and females because Jesus refers to the gender of this false teacher as being a woman. Therefore, we discover that she was teaching in violation of 1 Timothy 2:12. Now the question is, “Why did the pastor and other leaders allow her to teach?”

Some think the answer is found in an ancient manuscript where the Greek word “your” is inserted in this verse.

Therefore, some think this refers to the pastor’s wife, since the message is addressed to the pastor.² No one can prove that, but we can understand that this could be true. Maybe the pastor was pressured by his wife to allow her to teach. Others say she was the wife of a leader in the church. Then it would have been very difficult stop her if she was teaching error. That would have been a serious problem. It is also obvious that at least the pastor understood she was teaching error because we are told they tolerated her. They let her teach! At least the pastor knew

she was teaching error. May I be blunt for a minute—it could be politically dangerous to remove her from her teaching role. Not only might she be upset and make life difficult at home, but her followers might be upset to! Often, that is what happens.

Teacher is Named Jezebel by Jesus. The third problem is revealed by the name given to this woman. Jesus calls her Jezebel. It is important to notice that Jesus gave her this name. This is His name for her. Most Bible expositors do not believe Jezebel was her real name. It is usually agreed “Jezebel” describes the

character of this woman. 1 and 2 Kings record the history of the Jezebel in the Old Testament. The most important passage about her is probably 1 Kings 16:30-31. There we are told that Ahab, the son of Omri, did evil when he married Jezebel.³ Then 1 Kings 21:25 says that Jezebel incited Ahab to do evil. Only an evil person



would encourage another person to do evil. Such behavior reveals they do not care about others and righteousness. In 1 Kings 18:4 and 13 we learn that she killed most of the prophets of Israel. This reveals she hated the truth and the prophets of the Lord. In 1 Kings 19:2, we learn that Jezebel sent a message to Elijah that she planned to murder him within twenty-four hours. Then in 1 Kings 21:5-14, we are told that because Ahab wanted a vineyard owned by Naboth, she had Naboth murdered. Therefore, God killed her and 1 Kings

2. John Walvoord. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Moody Press. 1966. p. 73.

3. Keil and Delitzsch. 1 Kings. Commentary on the Old Testament. Hendrickson Publishers. March 2006. vol. 3. p. 160.

21:23-24 says the dogs ate her body. In summary, this reveals she was a very wicked woman who used people to gain what she desired. She hated the prophets of God, especially Elijah. So, Jesus named this false teacher Jezebel to communicate the character of this woman in Revelation 2. It is hard sometimes to believe a false teacher can be attractive on the outside and be a charismatic speaker. Most likely she appeared to be a godly woman because she was teaching the Bible, but her heart was evil. We have to remember that false teachers do not wear a sign that says, “False Teacher.” Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Unfortunately, many believers think that a big church means God is blessing it, and a dynamic, charismatic preacher must be empowered by the Spirit, but that is not true. They can just be good performers.

Error of the False Teacher. The fourth problem is that she taught error. The last part of this verse says that she,

... leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. Revelation 2:20 (NASB)

Now while the church in Pergamum was soft on false doctrine and sin, this church tolerated a false teacher who was also teaching false doctrine. She taught that it was okay to worship idols and engage in sexual sin. It is possible that Jezebel was influenced by culture since the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says the trade guilds in the city were heavily involved in immoral behavior.⁴

Now what is the motivation for a false teacher to teach error? Acts 20:29-30 gives us Paul’s answer when he said this to the elders in Ephesus . . .

... that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Acts 20:29-30 (NASB)

Paul gives us two truths. First, false teachers will arise from

within the church. That describes Jezebel. The second truth is that false teachers seek a following. That is their primary motivation. She used people! They made her feel good about herself. The apostle Peter agreed with Paul when he said this in 2 Peter 2:1.

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality . . . 2 Peter 2:1-2 (NASB)

Then later in verse 17, Peter warned that false teachers are springs without water. They promise spiritual refreshment, but they, themselves, are springs without water—there is nothing there. The spring is dry. They are an advertisement, promising that Jesus wants to make you wealthy, healthy, happy, and free from problems. But they are really a dry spring in the desert, in the midst of record heat. They are spiritually empty! In verse 19, we are told false teachers promise freedom—you can live as you desire.

... promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption . . . 2 Peter 2:19 (NASB)

Let me give you an example from our time of a false teacher who offers freedom. On the website of one false teacher, he explains away Jesus’ statement about divorce in Matthew 5:31-32. He claims that Jesus did not actually warn against divorce. Then he concludes that divorce is okay because God would not want us to be unhappy. So, if your spouse offends you, just divorce him or her. Be happy!

Another example is a recent doctrinal error called Hyper Grace. This false teaching says that a believer does not need to confess their sins because at the moment of salvation, all of a believer’s past, present, and future sins have been forgiven. So far, the teaching is true, the sins of a believer are forgiven at the moment of salvation. But then poison is added to the water. Hyper Grace says that since all our sins are forgiven, we are free to live as we like. Believers do not have to daily confess their sins, and those who disagree are legalistic. Amazingly,

4. Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor. “Definition for ‘Thyatira.’ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1915. “The guilds were closely connected with the Asiatic religion of the place. Pagan feasts, with which immoral practices were associated, were held, and therefore the nature of the guilds was such that they were opposed to Christianity.”

this false teaching is gaining acceptance in churches. Why is it spreading? The answer is that some pastors, church leaders, and believers do not have a strong grasp of Scripture. The arguments of Hyper Grace can sound convincing to those with a poor understanding of Scripture. One sad impact of this teaching is that the indwelling Holy Spirit is always grieved as a result of the believer never confessing his or her sins. That is, they are not walking in the Spirit due to unconfessed sins. As a result, they experience limited victory over sin and the fruit of the Spirit is not growing as it should. This false teaching results in a miserable Christian who struggles with more sin. But the teaching sounds like freedom!

There is another very important truth that we learn from Revelation 2:20.

But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My

bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. Revelation 2:20 (NASB)

False teaching is not just false teaching about a doctrine such as the deity of Christ. False teaching includes a wrong view about how to live a godly life.

False Teacher Was Given Time To Repent. Next we are told in Revelation 2:21 that God gave Jezebel time to repent, but she refused to repent.

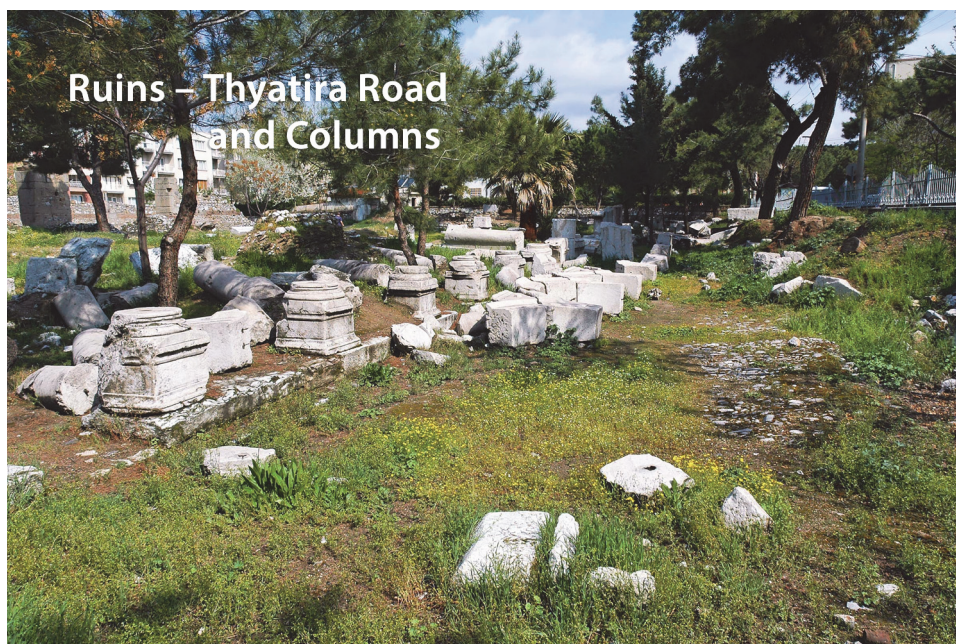
I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Revelation 2:21 (NASB)

This verse creates a question. How did God tell her to stop? Most likely the Holy Spirit was convicting her of her sin, but she did not respond. We are also told that God graciously gave her time to repent, but she did not repent. She did not stop! She was just like the Jezebel in the Old Testament. She wanted what she wanted. She endangered people.

The Followers of Jezebel. Obviously, Jezebel did not stop and decided to continue teaching. As a result, Jesus announced that He was going to make her and her followers sick.

Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they

repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. Revelation 2:22-23 (NASB)



The first thing that we need to notice is that both Jezebel and those following her were going to become sick. I have heard Christians say that they enjoy listening to Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Ken Copeland, or some other false teacher. I have heard Christians say that they attend a church even though the church teaches error on some key biblical doctrines. What they reveal is that they chose the church for the wrong reasons!

It is important to realize that God never warns us about the size of the church, the order of the church service, how the offering is collected or the color of the walls. Scripture never warns us about songs, choirs, musicians, the design of the pulpit or the charisma of the pastor or if he is a good speaker. But Scripture does warn us about false teaching! We

are warned again and again to watch out for false teaching. Correct doctrine is most important.

PERSONAL RESPONSE. So far, Jesus has spoken to the pastor, the woman called Jezebel, and the followers of Jezebel. Now in verses 24-25 Jesus speaks to a fifth group, everyone else.

But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them — I place no other burden on you. Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. Revelation 2:24-25 (NASB)

PRINCIPLE #1 – GOD PUNISHES FALSE TEACHERS AND THEIR SUPPORTERS. Now there are four important principles that leap from our study so far. The first principle is that eventually, God will punish false teachers and their supporters if they do not repent. That is the message of Revelation 2:22-23. Jesus wants every Christian to understand that not only will God punish the false teacher but He will also punish the followers. Why? Because 1) they believe the false teaching and 2) they are supporting the false teacher. Also, remember that 2 John 9-10 warns that believers are not to even greet a false teacher or have a meal with one. So, if we cannot do that, then we cannot attend their church either. Another important passage is Jude 3. It urges believers to . . .

. . . contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed . . . Jude 3-4 (NASB)

Contend refers to a battle, and Jude 17 tells us that the faith refers to the teaching of the apostles. So, Jesus urged these believers in Thyatira to hold on to the teaching of the apostles. This eliminates modern prophets.

PRINCIPLE #2 – EVERY BELIEVER MUST HAVE A FIRM GRASP OF SCRIPTURE. Next, I want to introduce the second principle with a personal illustration. Early in my twenties, I realized that what I knew about the Bible was what I had heard my pastor teach. I could not find chapter and verse for any doctrine, other than maybe John 3:16. I could not tell someone how to become a Christian. Then I realized that the

pastor could be wrong about how to be saved and go to heaven. If he was wrong, then I was in trouble. Since I was trusting that he was right, and if he was wrong, then I would go to hell. As a result, I wanted to study the Bible. So, I bought Navigator Memory Verse cards and started memorizing Bible verses. Then later in my twenties, a man and his wife came to our church and started attending what we called the Young Marrieds Group. Eventually, my wife and I became friends with them and our friendship still exists to this day. As I began to know him, I discovered that he knew more about the Bible than I did. Frankly, I was convicted by my lack of biblical knowledge. I was impressed that my friend was not a pastor and, yet, he knew so much about the Bible. The Lord used my new friend to convict me of my lack of biblical knowledge. So, I began a serious journey to obtain Bible knowledge not for the sake of Bible knowledge, but because I wanted to know what Scripture taught so that I could know who was teaching truth or error. Then one day my new friend invited us to his home, and I discovered that he had a library with many books about the Bible. He had commentaries, systematic theologies, Bible dictionaries and other solid books. I was amazed, I had never seen that in anyone's home. Then he handed me my first systematic theology. I have to admit that I struggled reading it. It was deep! But the more I studied, the easier it became to understand Scripture and God.

So, why did I share my personal story? Because some believers in the church in Thyatira did not know enough about Scripture to understand that Jezebel was teaching error and maybe you are in the same situation. One of the most important messages from this study is that we need to know the Bible ourselves. We need to be Bereans, Acts 17:11. Apparently, the pastor of Thyatira was not teaching the truth. Apparently, the other church leaders did not know Scripture very well or they were very afraid to correct the situation. So, the second principle is that every believer must have a firm grasp of Scripture in order to identify false teachers and avoid their teaching!

But how does a Christian learn the Bible for himself or herself?

1) First, start reading the Bible. There are great benefits to reading through the Bible in one year. But I would recommend choosing a book of the Bible. If it is a small book

such as Ephesians or Jude, then just reread that book every day for 30 days. When you first start, you may not remember very much. But after two weeks of reading, you will already know what is in the next chapter before you even read it. By the end of 30 days you will know every chapter and verse and the message of the book. You will be asking questions. What you learn will motivate you to do it again with another book. So keep going! If you start with a larger book such as Matthew or Romans, then divide the book into smaller sections. Maybe only five chapters and read them for 30 days. Then choose the next five chapters.

2) Start memorizing Scripture. Try a few verses. Do not try to memorize everything, or you will become discouraged. It is amazing what happens when the Word of God is locked

away in your mind. As you read you will start connecting different passages together that will help you understand biblical truth and gain new insights. You will start systematizing truth.

3) Start buying some books about the Bible; but before you buy, be sure that the author is biblically sound. Ask someone for a recommendation. I am sorry to say that there are some books in Christian Book Stores that are not biblically solid. In the process of buying books, be sure to study the Bible more than a systematic theology book. The systematic theology is not inspired, but the Bible is inspired. You want to be a Biblicist first.

4) Attend classes that dig deep into the meat of the Word. Now let me add this. It takes discipline to learn Scripture. But as we have already discovered in the study “How to Walk With God” that is how we become a father of the faith. That is, how we know Him “who was has been from the beginning.” A father of the faith knows more than the elementary truths about God. Jeremiah 9:23-24 teaches us that God will be pleased that you are digging to know more about Him.

PRINCIPLE #3 – CHURCH LEADERS MUST PREVENT FALSE TEACHERS FROM TEACHING. The third principle is

that church leaders are to prevent false teachers from teaching in the church! Now let’s revisit a question that I asked earlier. Why did the pastor tolerate Jezebel? Jesus has revealed that he knew she was teaching error and let her teach anyway.



As a result, Jesus publicly rebuked him, and Christians for thousands of years have read the rebuke as well as the other churches that read the book of Revelation as it was circulated among the early churches. The message is the pastor and the leaders should have stopped her, rather than be fearful. They needed to fight for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. It starts by testing prospective teachers and removing them when they go astray.

PRINCIPLE #4 – CHURCH LEADERS MUST KNOW SCRIPTURE TO DEFEND IT. The fourth and final principle is that church leaders must have a firm understanding of Scripture in order to defend it. This principle is necessary in order to perform principle number three. The pastor and leaders must

know biblical truth so that they can identify false teaching in order to defend the faith once for all delivered to the saints and protect others in the church. It is common for church leaders to believe that only the pastor or pastors need to know Scripture. How else will all of the leaders understand that error is being taught if they do not know Scripture themselves?

PROMISES TO BELIEVERS. The final verses, Revelation 2:26-29 are promises to believers. Believers are told they will rule in the millennial kingdom and God will give them the morning star.

He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS;

AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also 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.” Revelation 2:26-29 (NASB)

The morning star may refer to Daniel 12:3. Actually, we do not know for sure what it is. It may imply that believers will be like Christ. Whatever it is, we will find out some day.

CONCLUSION. I want to encourage you to diligently study the meat of the Word. Dig deep. Discover the gold mine of treasure and seek to become a father of the faith.