

# The Church in Thyatira – To whom and what are you loyal?

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Revelation 2: 18 – 29

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“The blind and cowardly spirit of evil is forever telling you that evil things are [excusable], and you shall not die for them; and that good things are impossible, and you need not live for them. And, if you believe these things, you will find some day, *to your cost*, that they are untrue.” This quote could have been coined just yesterday by any thinking person looking around at the events unfolding in Cayman – and not just in regard to the gun crimes themselves, though people do try to find excuses even for them. Obviously, though, there was nothing new in this thought a hundred years or so ago, when they were attributed to a John Ruskin (who was not a pastor or religious writer). The ancient Israelites had understood this to have been recognised from the earliest days of humankind, when Eve encountered Satan in the Garden of Eden. So a couple of pages into the start of the Bible we find him tempting Eve with that tactic still so successful with us humans, preying on our vanity, ‘surely you are too intelligent to believe that God really meant you will die’. Not to mention preying on our greed. Poor Eve couldn’t be satisfied that God had given her and Adam everything in the world except that one thing. Nope. Couldn’t resist risking the world when someone else could offer her just *one* thing more. And if we take a tour through the eons of history covered by the Bible, the same thing is repeated over and over as God tries to get humans to realise the great potential that in His grace He has made us capable of achieving. And when we get to a few pages from the end, where we read today, we find Christ having to give the warning all over again. If they don’t stop those ‘evil things’ and turn to the ‘good things’, as Mr. Ruskin put it, or “unless they repent of her ways” as we heard Christ say, suffering and death will result – for everyone touched by it, one way or another. And once again, they lose everything – for only they who *overcome* the grasping lure of evil and do the “will of Christ to the end”, will get the eternal reward. It is *still* plain to see: earthly suffering and death inevitably result when people do evil. And Christ warns us that for those who remain unrepentant, eternal death follows, instead of eternal life if we repent and believe in Him.

The thing that ought to concentrate our minds about these seven letters we have started looking at, is that they are to the *churches*! To those professing to be followers of Christ, *not* the non-Christians of Thyatira and the 6 other cities. That is the same with St. Paul’s letters, of course. You can’t dismiss them as speaking to the Romans, or Corinthians, etc., who were pagans or Jews – they were speaking to the people *in the Churches* of these places. We probably more readily see warning signs around ‘what is going on in Cayman’ today, generally meaning what everyone else is doing, not us in the church. But going by Biblical precedent, if we should think that Jesus just might not be happy with what He sees happening here, guess what? It’s not those who do not believe in God and belittle anything in relation to faith and trying to do what is “good” who will hear from Him about His disappointment in *them*. It’s me and you, and our fellow church members around Cayman, that will hear from Him that, ‘I know all about you’, then possibly some commendation for our 100 plus years of ministry in West Bay, “but” ... “but I have this complaint against you.”

And in today's letter to the Church in Thyatira the complaint is especially strong – and it is *about* what they are doing and not doing about people *within the Church itself!* Not a complaint about what they are doing in regard to all these non-believers we think are the source of our problems, present and future. And one of these people in the Church is very prominent, 'That woman – that Jezebel *who calls herself a prophet*' – who is teaching within the Church. Teaching as a self styled prophet – but in Christ's own words, "leading my servants astray." Actually, teaching in the Church is an awesome responsibility and I suspect when we are called upon to do so formally, like this, or as Sunday School teachers, etc., we try to be very careful in what we say; and double check our references and the point we are expounding to try to ensure it conforms to God's central message of redemptive love through commitment and obedience to the *righteous* Christ. But, with these letters in Revelations, it is necessary to open up our minds to the broader picture of the messages, where the language used covers both specific sins as well as wider analogies. In today's message, the sins were the result of the spiritual "adultery" to Christ by people within the Church, including one who was teaching. So we need to ask, who else from amongst the church today '*teaches*', besides those who stand formally in front of the congregation or a class?

Don't we all? Even if it is just to your young children you commendably bring to service with you each Sunday. What are they really learning from you as to the centrality of God in your worship as well as in what you do each day? Do they get the message from what you say after service that for you it really was about drawing closer to God and being renewed by Him? Or might they get the impression that it's more about the proverbial "me" – because they hear a lot more about "I didn't like the music", "the sermon was too long and boring", "the air conditioning too cold for my comfort" and so on? Now I hasten to say that I am not looking for an excuse for those of us who are in charge of the music and the preaching and setting the A-C and all those things that are part of the worship service. We each need to always do our best with our particular task for the day, as we are doing it for God; and if we are distracting people from focusing on God because we haven't put enough commitment into it, we are not being faithful servants. But I think you get my point of how easy it is for any of us to be misleading someone by what we are *teaching* in regard to faithfulness to the God Who is not satisfied to be worshipped by anyone who thinks they can also be focused on some 'idol', even if it is only our own quest for comfort and being pleased. However, we no doubt have in today's Cayman some of the other "idols" that people in the Church in Thyatira were embracing or trying to just *use*, while also trying to serve the true God. That point, the need for only *one* God in our lives, and the *selfless* dedication that requires, is central to today's message, and that is why Christ chose to refer to the misleading prophetess as a "Jezebel".

The Jezebel of the Old Testament was a well known icon of the futility of trying to live our lives by proclaiming God as Lord but having other gods, other things, that we let set at least some of our values. As Jesus had later bluntly put it while He walked this earth, when it comes to serving God, we cannot serve two masters. He was emphasising that point again today in His Revelation through John from His heavenly base to the Church in Thyatira. Whether or not King Ahab of Israel would have

been any better had he not married Jezebel, we will not know. His father is described as having “sinned more than all those before him” – until Ahab came along! But one of the evil things Ahab is blamed for is that once he married Jezebel he began to serve and worship Baal, the idol god that Jezebel brought from her home country. Commentators point out that Ahab named his sons Ahaziah, meaning “the Lord grasps” and Joram, meaning “the Lord is exalted,” suggesting that he had not intended to replace the worship of the Lord with the worship of Baal, but to worship both, a fatal notion, absolutely incompatible. Jezebel was also infamous for her utter ruthlessness to get what she, or her husband, wanted, like Naboth’s vineyard, leading 1 Kings to conclude that “there was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, *urged on by Jezebel* his wife”.

Alas, that woman in Thyatira was neither the first or last of the false prophets, a vocation that seems still much in demand in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The two sins she is specifically accused by Christ of misleading people in the church to commit were sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. Interestingly, these were the basic rules that the Council of Jerusalem had agreed, in Acts 15, that the gentiles must abide by when they accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour and converted to Christianity. Significantly in this regard, the Apostles made a point to emphasise that these converts did *not* have to be circumcised, despite the emphasis on this in the old covenant between God and His people, and did not have to abide by the other Mosaic laws about not eating certain kinds of food, etc. The only other rule from the Council was that the non-Jewish converts should abstain from eating meat with the blood still in it, as this was so repugnant to the Jews who had converted to Christianity that they would never be able to sit down with the Gentile Christians in fellowship. The other two rules, which were what people in the Thyatira church had angered Christ by breaching, also had elements of social considerations in them. The social fallout from sexual immorality continues to wreak havoc in society today, even as we push the limits more and more. I think this is pretty undeniable. Some years ago, when Rev. Wickwire arrived, I told her that from my observations adultery and other un-repentant sexual immorality had caused more pain and were at the root of more suffering than any other social issue we faced, including drugs. For drug abuse *often* seemed to be a secondary problem that flowed from the break down of caring family environments as one or both parents abandoned their responsibilities by allowing themselves to be ruled by this kind of idolatry. But besides such social consequences and suffering not being in keeping with the love your neighbour requirement of God, sexual immorality was often associated with pagan worship practices in those days.

The issue with food sacrificed to idols, which was widely available in these areas with pagan temples, was the risk of contamination by the idol worship practices. St. Paul said that while *he* knew an idol was nothing, new converts to Christianity could be led astray if they started thinking about the process. And it is believed that why it had become such a big issue in the church there, was that Thyatira was a small place, but, once again like the Cayman success story, it had made itself into a thriving commercial centre. It was well known for the number of trade guilds that operated there, which had sort of sewn up the different types of businesses. So to get into a business or employment, you needed to belong to one of these, and in these, such sacrifices and celebratory meals of the

meat were part of the normal social scene. In other words, to put it in today's perspective, it wasn't necessarily *how much* you knew, how *competent* you were, but *who* you knew, in order to break into one of these occupations - you needed to know 'the right people'. And that meant networking in a place where the majority of the business and trades people loved both their meals and the other thrills of the flesh that pagan worship offered. Perhaps it seems a familiar scene to us here today!

So the Jezebel of a woman seemed to be preaching that the Christians in the Church in Thyatira did not have to forgo the prosperity that could be gained through making the right connections in these guilds, because you could take part in both the meals, even if the meat had been sacrificed to idols, and in the immoral carrying on that went with it, without being unfaithful to God. 'Surely God didn't mean you mustn't enjoy the prosperity that is available in this way. Surely you will not die by eating the fruit of this tree. After all what else is available for you to do? Surely you don't believe God is going to *provide* for you. You've got to do what you've got to do.' I'll leave you to fill in the details of what are some of the ways the Christian church in Cayman today is being compromised, not just by what our comments about our church services might be teaching others about the importance of God versus our comfort and enjoyment, as I touched on before, but what we as professing Christians might be 'preaching' as we go out amongst the businesses and trades and professions of our beloved little Thyatira that we find increasingly hard to recognise. Do others see in us a clear message of justice and mercy and humility and the caring love of Christ for others? Or do they see a message that suggests we'll leave that for Sunday morning – and preferably no more than an hour of it - so the Jezebels and the Ahabs can get their vineyards? After all, what are the Naboths of this world doing with a vineyard in the first place, or for that matter a decent house, or a job that pays a living wage that can support his family adequately, or a pension that is actually sufficient for him to be able to live on when he is too old to work? And *surely* it is more important that I help him get money making opportunities than teach him about righteousness through Christ. As with the church in Thyatira, the churches of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world face the same challenges. And a big part of it seems well summed up in this observation by a writer, Sydney J. Harris, "Men make counterfeit money; in many more cases, money makes counterfeit men." It is hard to deny that – 'in many cases, money makes counterfeit men.' It is more correct, though, to put it the way Jesus did, not the money, but the *love* of money is the corrupting danger.

And so it is sobering to think that as Christians go out in the world wherever we live, is our life such a mixed message that people look at me and have to wonder, as in our theme today, "To whom or what are you loyal?" If so, no wonder Christianity is being challenged so in our western world! I admit I was saddened by the headline in Friday's Compass about the responses to their latest poll, where the result was that "Most think politicians don't need to be good Christians". Though I had to laugh at one response which asked, "*Good* Christians, as opposed to what? Bad Christians or good Muslims?!!!! I guess just the fact the nation's major newspaper framed the question that way shows the depth of the lack of understanding in today's Cayman of being a Christian. Anyway, that aside, I was saddened, though not surprised, as I have always tried to argue that if we do not let *God* set our standards on what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false, *whose* standards *can* we rely on to define these? The comments about us were also saddening, like "It doesn't matter. Greed changes them anyway." In a similar vein, I was reading an article in Psychology Today recently – only because of the

headline, I hasten to add, before you think I am trying to suggest I read such highfaluting stuff all the time! The author was incensed that several Christian US Senators had attended a prayer meeting to call on God to help them kill certain healthcare legislation. He listed things they were saying they were fearful about, but these were not actually in the bill, he said.

He taunted them that he must have missed the piece in the Bible where any action of Jesus supported their contentions. Then wrote, “And the saddest part is that many people only use their religion as a cloak for the real reason they oppose it; they don’t want taxes raised. I am sickened by all of this, and it is no wonder that many non-religious people find religious people (at least of this sort) not just silly, but *lacking a basic human decency*.” Wow! That is certainly not the message our actions should be preaching.

And as we saw from today’s text, God is *not happy* when that is what we do ‘teach’. Commentators have pointed out that Thyatira was the smallest and least important of the 7 cities to whose churches the letters are written – and yet it was the longest letter. They see this as a sign of the extent of God’s anger to anyone who engages in this spiritual adultery and misleading of His people, spurred on by material lures. Another point we cannot fail to note is that the Jezebels of the Church are in plain sight, as, like the woman today, they tend to highlight themselves as a Christian and some claim a special position, like our prophetess. But the image of Christ dictating this particular letter is represented by the *eyes like blazing fire*, which underscores His warning in verse 23, “then all the Churches will know that I am He who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” In other words, it is not just the Jezebels, who are overtly doing wrong, that those penetrating eyes are focusing on. It is all those others who might appear to be going through the right motions but whose hearts and minds are nevertheless unfaithful to Christ. God had long ago and repeatedly said to the Israelites, ‘I hate your [religious] rituals!’ If you love me go and find the lost sheep and bring them back to my fold – feed my sheep – care for the sick and the fatherless’.

God is not a God of compromises. As Jesus said, ‘if you want to serve me, you must *follow me*’. He remains resolute in that, as the feet of burnished bronze in today’s text suggest. He had started by commending the Church as a whole on its faith, its service and its perseverance, noting it was doing even more now than when it first got started; it was growing in its service, which any faithful church should. Then He brings them up short with the fact that all of that was not good enough, as some of them were being unfaithful, were compromising, and warned of what would happen to those who were being disloyal if they did not repent. The Rev. Tim Keller too has noted the dangers for churches which are ‘successful’. He makes the point that it is much easier to work with Christians who recognise they are “poor in spirit” as they see how much they need to still be doing. But he says it gets much harder with what he calls those who consider themselves as *middle class in spirit*! They’ve been doing some good things and feel pretty satisfied with themselves - and that is where we run the risk of stopping our growing in Christ, from which decay and rebellion so easily set in. But Michael Wilcock in his commentary on today’s text offers hope for us when he notes that after Christ’s warning, “he promises to those who will repent, that with this one major hindrance removed they will become the splendid missionary church they have it in them to be.”

Our theme too notes our own Church's quest to be a splendid missional church. But for that to happen depends on whether you and I choose to be *concerned with what Christ is saying to us in His letters*. Will people see that your loyalty, and my loyalty, lies with Him? And will our hearts and minds confirm this to the penetrating eyes of Christ? Amen