

The letter to Thyatira * Revelation 2:18-29

January 28, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

We're in for a real treat this morning. Through the wonders of modern technology, I've arranged for a guest speaker to join us, someone who was actually IN the city that received today's letter, a man from Thyatira named Steve. Give me just a minute and I'll go and see if he's ready. While I'm doing that, why don't you turn to Revelation 2:18, that'll speed things along here. Revelation 2:18 – just give me a minute –

Well hello and greetings to you from the distant past. My name is Steve and I'm from the ancient city of Thyatira, born and bred. You might have actually heard of my sister, Lydia. She appears in your Bible in Acts 16:14; she moved away to Philippi to sell the purple cloth we made in Thyatira and while she was there, she met the apostle Paul. She found out about Jesus and became the first recorded person in what you call Turkey to come to faith in Jesus. She got really excited about her faith and came home and shared it with me and well before you knew it, there was a whole group of us in Thyatira following Jesus.

And that led to some pretty interesting challenges. We're are a real blue collar town here in Thyatira – working-class Steeltown - and the trade guilds pretty much run the city.

If you wanna work in Thyatira, you gotta belong to a trade guild. And if you're gonna belong to a trade guild, then you gotta go to their guild feasts. And I'll tell you, there's some pretty unsavory stuff that goes on at those guild feasts - they even have patron gods that they worship - and so we as believers had to really ask ourselves: 'What do we believe and how do we act in light of it?' 'How do I conduct myself as a follower of Jesus and what does that say about what I believe?'

I think that's what Jesus was getting at when He wrote the letter to us that He did. The letter to the church at Thyatira. Tell you what, why don't I just read it to you and then I'll go back and tell you what it meant to us when it first arrived in Thyatira.

Revelation 2, starting in verse 18, and I'm actually going to read from the ESV because it helps something to stand out that I think is really important to the message of the letter to Thyatira.

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

19 "'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

20 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.

21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

22 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,

23 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.

24 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.

25 Only hold fast what you have until I come.

26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,

27 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.

28 And I will give him the morning star.

29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

This is the letter that Jesus wrote to my church and a revelation of Jesus to your church.

What's fascinating to me is that Jesus has really tailor-made this letter to our church. There's things here that you probably wouldn't catch unless you were from Thyatira.

For example, right off the top there, Jesus calls Himself 'the Son of God.' Well, that's true, He is the one and only Son of God, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, who died and was buried, who rose again to give us the promise of eternal life.

But if you're from Thyatira, you'll know that there's someone else who claimed to be the 'Son of God.' You've probably heard of a god named Zeus; Zeus had a son named Apollos. And wouldn't you know it, Apollo was the patron deity of Thyatira, and many in our town to called *him* 'the son of God.'

Right off the bat though, Jesus says 'You've got it mixed up guys. Apollos is a pretender; I'm the REAL Son of God.'

As the Son of God, He has eyes like a flame of fire (more on that in a minute); He has feet like burnished bronze. Now, on one level, that feet bit is a sign of stability and strength. Jesus stands strong and immovable. But burnished bronze, that's one of our specialities at home in Thyatira.¹ People in our little church work with that stuff every day and make their living from it. Jesus is identifying with us as He writes His letter.

And not only that, He has in fact structured His letter around an idea that we all understand. We're no philosophers here in Thyatira; we're not politicians or intellectuals, but we sure know how to work with our hands. And did you notice the emphasis on 'works' in Jesus' letter? Four times, He uses that same word to challenge our church to more and deeper faithfulness. First He talks about 'your work,' then 'her work,' then 'their work' and finally 'His work.' Let me show you what I mean.

First it's 'your works' He talks about. Verse 19: "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first."

It's not easy to be a Christian in Thyatira. Some of us have tried to break free from the trade guilds and make a go of it on our own, but that's come at a HUGE financial cost. People won't hire you unless you're with a trade guild. So we've banded together as believers to love one another in tangible ways, to make sure that everybody has food to eat and a roof over their head. We've tried hard to serve one another and even those who aren't believers yet. And we've tried hard to hold fast to Jesus' name with faithfulness and patient endurance.

It's nice to know that Jesus sees that and appreciates it. And that last part – your latter works exceed the first – that tells me that we're growing as believers. We started off doing good things, but those good things have grown and matured with time and it's really encouraging to have Jesus see that and applaud us and say 'I know YOUR WORKS.'

But then He shifts to talk about 'her works' and I'll tell you, this was a real wake-up call for our church. Here's what was going on.

Like I said, if you wanna do business in Thyatira you need to be a part of a guild and being a part of a guild means going to guild feasts. And guild feasts aren't just about supper; they're part union planning, they're part religious ceremony and they're part 'what happens at guild meeting stays at guild meeting.'

Thyatira's patron god was Apollos but every trade guild had their own patron god. And at these guild feasts, they'd worship their gods – their idols, really. They'd say 'oh Apollos or whoever, I offer myself to you' and as a follower of Jesus, I just couldn't do that. And so that's why a lot of us in our church decided to go out on our own and leave the guilds behind.

There was though a *group* in our church who didn't think that worshipping other gods was such a big deal. There was this lady in our church who called herself a 'prophetess' who was telling people 'secret teachings' and 'deep things,' like 'there's nothing wrong with worshipping an idol; after all, it's just an idol and not really a god' and people were lining up behind her.

Her name wasn't really Jezebel; that was just a clever nod to an Old Testament queen who led Israel into idolatry. But now this lady, this Thyatireen Jezebel who came to our worship meetings was doing the exact same thing. And people were going along with her and taking part in guild feasts with reservation.

And I'll admit, I put up with it. I tolerated it. I thought 'I'll go along to get along.' But you know, I had serious reservations. Even if this idol was a complete fake, it was taking up devotional space that only Jesus deserves. And I'll be honest; it seemed kind of like these people were more concerned with making a living than living for Jesus and that's the kind of compromise that just doesn't work.

And so it was a real wake-up call when we received Jesus' letter calling us to repent of 'her works.' That's verse 22. Jesus revealed to us that 'her works' were actually earning the wages of death (v. 23).

Now I don't know if there was actually sexual immorality going on, actual adultery; who knows what was going on behind closed doors,ⁱⁱ but when I heard this letter, I realized that 'her works' were not innocent compromises to make a living; they were acts of spiritual adultery and my fellow believers were being unfaithful to Jesus. By going along with her, they participated in 'her works.'

And so I repented of my permissiveness and pled with my brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same. Because, as verse 23 says, Jesus will give to each according to 'their works.' Verse 23 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. (Rev 2:23 ESV). (In the letter it's 'your' works but for the sake of clarity, we'll use 'their').

Jesus reminds us here that each will be accountable for their works. To quote Paul (Romans 2:6-8):

6 He will render to each one according to his works:

7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;

8 but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury (Rom 2:6-8 ESV).

God's not playing around here. He sent His one and only Son; His one and only Son bled and died for us to win us back for God! That kind of loving sacrifice calls for complete commitment and utter fidelity in word AND in deed. Not half-heartedness, not tentative commitment; no, that kind of love calls us to hold fast with all that we are. And verse 25 – Jesus isn't looking for a laundry list of 'to do's' to keep Him – He simply says 'Hold fast [to] what you have until I come.' 'You have your Bibles; you have your faith as you were taught it.' 'Hold fast to me until I come.' And I would add 'live in light of it.'

Jesus makes it clear here that all will receive according to their works. None of us will get by without being held accountable – verse 23 – Jesus says – 'I am He who searches heart and mind' - and that's why He said He had eyes like a flame of fire right off the top (v. 18). Jesus sees all.ⁱⁱⁱ His vision penetrates heart and mind and soul and so when He says 'each will receive according to their works,' I'm going to take that seriously!

So we need to consider – what are 'your works' like? Are you working out love and faith and service and endurance? Or are 'your works' more like 'her works,' idolatry and infidelity? After all, each of us will receive what 'their works' deserve.

But there IS one more set of works to consider - 'His works.'

Look at it in verse 26 - The one who conquers and who keeps *my works* [ie., 'His works'] until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations.

That to me is proof that this is not Jesus telling us to earn His favour; it's Jesus saying 'hold tight to what I've done and live in light of it because I already love you enough to die for you.' Jesus' death on the Cross shows us what love is like, shows us how committed He is to us; but it's also HIS work. It's what He has accomplished. 'It is finished!' It's not what WE do, it's what HE's done that makes us right with God and He calls us to hold tight to Him and His works until the end.

Because when we do, when we hold onto 'His works,' Jesus promises us authority and victory in Him.

Remember when Jesus said that He was the Son of God right off the top? (v. 18). This last part is actually a reference to another passage about the 'Son of God.' Psalm 2 says that the Son of God will rule the nations with an 'iron scepter;' here, Jesus says 'I AM that Son of God and if you hold tight to Me, I will actually give you that iron scepter so that YOU can reign too!' He says 'I will give you the very authority that God Himself gives Me!'

Jesus promises us authority and He promises us victory. The Romans liked to think of Venus as the morning star and they took her to be a sign of victory and triumph;^{iv} in Revelation 22:16, Jesus calls Himself the morning star and essentially says 'if you hold on to Me and My works, I will share Myself with you and give you victory through Me.'

This is what Jesus holds out to us if we hold on to Him – authority and victory in Him!

He knows 'your works,' 'He despises 'her works,' He will give to each according to 'their works' and calls us all to hold tight to 'His works.'

And that's His letter to us at Thyatira.

But let's stop for a minute and think about what this means for you here at Langford. Your pastor tells me that you don't have any Jezebels here at this church but I'd be willing to bet that the *spirit* of Jezebel is just as much alive and well in your day as it was mine. The spirit of compromise, the spirit of 'go along to get along,' the spirit of compartmentalizing so that you act according to one standard at church and another at work.

So when you boil it right down, I think it all comes down to the questions that *we* asked ourselves in Thyatira: What are we doing? And what do those actions say about our faith?

And maybe even more to the point – What are your works like? Her works? Or His?

Works that compromise your commitment to a redeeming God who laid down His life for you?

Or works that hold tight to His work that redeemed you in the first place?

Jesus gave up His power so that we could receive authority from God. And He suffered the ultimate defeat – death on the Cross – so that He could give us victory.

Each will receive according to their works – let your works reflect His. Let your works be characterized by love and faith and service and perseverance.

And do that as an individual but do it as a church too.

Let love characterize your church – love each other and help each other to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

Let faith characterize your church – keep encouraging your pastor to stay focused on Jesus, teaching the truth of the Gospel that's been passed down since before my time.

Let service characterize your church – I hear that you are looking for some people to help out on the Mission Team – that's a great way to engage your church in service for the benefit of others.

And let patient endurance characterize your church - week in, week out, loving one another, serving one another, holding fast to the Lord of Life.

To quote Paul once more:

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:8-10 NIV).

Let your works reflect His.

ⁱ See Craig Keener, *Revelation* (NIVAC), 133.

ⁱⁱ John Stott, *What Christ thinks of the Church*, 54.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (NCBC), 104.

^{iv} Witherington, 104.