

Introduction

In the late afternoon of July 2, 1863, the Battle of Gettysburg was well underway. There were two hills to the south of town which formed the left flank of the Union line. Big Round Top and Little Round Top which were conveniently named because one was larger than the other. Little Round Top was largely undefended, due to Gen. Daniel Sickles not following orders. Gen. George Meade sought a unit to defend this area, for he knew that if this flank were left undefended, the Confederate Army had an open advance on the back of the Union line. Col. Strong Vincent intercepted a messenger, who had orders for Brig. Gen. James Barnes, and took it upon himself to position his brigade in defense. Now, Col. Vincent was a young, go-getting Col. He was a dapper man, former lawyer, and had incredible sideburns. His standard-bearer would write later that when he intercepted this messenger, he replied with “eyes aflame” that he would take the responsibility of his unit defending the hill. He’s responsible for positioning his men, especially the more famous Col. Joshua Chamberlain and not only defending but pushing back the Confederate advance. His instructions were clear as he ordered Chamberlain to hold the extreme left flank of the Union Army “against all hazards.” At one point in the battle, the Confederates were pushing up the hill and the Union line began to buckle. It was at this moment that Col. Vincent stood atop a large boulder with his prized riding crop from his wife raised and shouted “Don’t give an inch!” Unfortunately, he would be shot and carried from the battlefield where five days later, he would pass due to his wound. Today’s scripture, Rev. 2: 18-29, the Letter to Thyatira I think can be summed up with this simple phrase, “Don’t give an inch.” You see, when the Lord’s church is under attack, we cannot afford to give an inch. And the charge against the Church of Thyatira is one of toleration. Some have given an inch and more...

So let’s dive in and unpack this letter. As Isaac mentioned in his sermon, the first in this series, these letters generally follow a similar pattern with seven “sections.” First, I want to give a little background on the city. Second, I’d like to explore these seven sections, not necessarily as points but to follow the flow of the letter. At the end, I’d like to close with three brief points of application.

Thyatira is mentioned one other time in the Bible, in Acts 16:14. We read of Lydia of Thyatira, a dealer in purple goods, and her conversion before opening her home to Paul, Silas, and Timothy. The significance of mentioning her as a “dealer of purple goods” gives us a little insight into Thyatira, but history records quite a bit about this city. Thyatira was a city known specifically for its dyeing facilities and cloth trade, but had merchants and guilds of all trades. It was a major city of commerce and craft. These guilds could be incredibly beneficial to those looking to succeed, but they could also be little idol factories. This little bit of insight into the city should help us understand what’s going on in this church that it receives a letter. Let’s look at those seven sections of the letter next...

1. Command to Write (v. 18)
2. Christ's Self Description (v. 18)

In verse 18, we see the command to write. Jesus instructs the author to write the words of "The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze." Remember the list of descriptors from Chapter 1? Two of these three are listed there. Son of God is not included and I think it's added here to highlight two features of this letter. First, going back to our background of the city of Thyatira... With there being a multitude of trade guilds, each guild would have a patron "god" that these guildmembers would look to for prosperity. One specific deity as well as the divine emperor, were considered the sons of the god Zeus. So it seems as though Jesus is throwing down a gauntlet here and saying "I am the Son of God. Look to me for all your needs." The other feature of this title is one of judgment. Psalm 2: 7-9 says this;

"I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'"

Jesus Christ is the divine judge and we will see how this plays out in the rest of the letter, specifically when we get to the exhortation and promise of this letter. "Eyes like a flame of fire, and... feet like burnished bronze" points back to the book of Daniel. If you remember, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into a fiery furnace that was heated seven times more. They were bound up and thrown in, and the furnace was so hot that it burned up those who delivered them into the furnace. Nebuchadnezzar can't believe what he sees when he discovers that there are actually four men in the furnace. And this fourth man? Described as "like a son of the gods." Daniel later describes a man he sees as having "eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze." Isn't it fitting that this fourth man was like a son of the gods and bronze is made in a furnace?

3. Commendation of the Church's Good Works (v. 19)

In verse 19, the church's good works are laid out. And it is an impressive list. Love, faith, service, and patient endurance. Doesn't that sound like a church we would all want to be a part of? I mean, imagine being a member of a church that Jesus absolutely lauds for their works, not because of what it might do for us, but what it does for the glory of Jesus Christ? Not only is this list impressive, but Jesus says that their latter works exceed the first! The opposite occurred in Ephesus where the church started hot, but fizzled out. Here we see a church that has continued fanning the flames of love, faith, service, and patient endurance. They have matured and grown in their works that flow from an obedient and repentant heart. May we also continue to grow that our latter works would exceed our first!

4. Accusation of Sin (v. 20)

We already know something is up, given the flow of previous letters. Even with the previous commendation, Christ still finds fault in the church of Thyatira. What could they possibly be doing, if the commendation is that impressive? Just as Pergamum struggled with false prophets, so too does Thyatira. "That woman Jezebel" may or may not refer to a woman actually named Jezebel. That's not the important part, though. We read of "the" Jezebel in 1 Kings 16 and 21. She was a wicked woman, who worshipped Baal and convinced her husband, Ahab to do the same. Ahab was openly committing adultery on the one true God with Baal, because of the woman he had married. So here and now, we have a group of false prophets, or "Jezebel and her children", that are openly teaching that accepting sexual immorality and idolatry was ok in the Thyatiran culture. Again, being such a large city of guilds meant that if you were involved in any way, shape, or form with any of the various trades, you were probably a guild member. If you wanted to be successful or even get ahead, well, you had to compromise. Christian guild members would be expected to participate and pay homage to guild deities the same as the non-Christian members would. Yet, the truth is that God is the only God worthy of our worship and praise. This meant they had to stand against the societal expectations and the false teachings of Jezebel and her children.

5. Exhortation to Repent with a Warning of Judgment (vv. 21-23)

Jesus continues, saying that he has given her time to repent. But she has refused his offer. We all know what that offer is... repent by turning away from sin and seeking Christ. It appears Jezebel has openly rejected the offer, because listen to what comes next- "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," Jesus is saying that he has given these false teachers their chance, they have spurned that chance, and now will face punishment. They will reap what they have sown and this is a promise from Jesus. BUT he extends a lifeline of mercy to those disciples who will repent. They still have time to repent and turn from the evil teachings of these false prophets, who are described in verse 23 as her children. For Jesus Christ, as it also says in verse 23, searches mind and heart. None can escape his eyes like flames of fire. No one can hide anything in mind or heart from the ultimate judge. He will give to each of us according to our works.

6. Exhortation to Discern the Truth of the Preceding Message (vv. 24-25)

This point is a little more loose than the rest, but no less important. Jesus writes a special message to those who do not hold the teaching of Jezebel. Those who have not struggled with the false teachings. These have clung to the truth and are firm and secure in their standing. Jesus has no other burden to lay on them. He simply says to hold fast to what they have until he returns. Or, as I said earlier, don't give an inch.

7. Promise to the Conquerors (vv. 26-29)

Jesus closes out the letter by referencing Psalm 2 again. But this time, he promises that those who conquer and keep his works until the end will reign with him. Remember the list of

commendations? This list sums up what it means to persevere and patiently endure. By displaying love, faith, service, and patient endurance, those who hold fast and grow in their works will persevere to the very end and reign with Christ. How beautiful is this promise? What more could we ask for?

Those who overcome will be given the “morning star.” This is yet another Old Testament promise related to messianic rule. But something else to think about is that the morning star in the ancient world and specifically Rome was Venus. And Roman emperors, generals, and legions did everything they could to relate to Venus, including being descended from the goddess Venus, building temples to the star, and carrying the star on battle standards. It’s quite possible that Jesus is emphasizing his sovereignty by saying that he will deliver the morning star to his followers that overcome the evil world empires like Rome.

We’ve walked through this letter and picked up on some of the details. Obviously this letter was addressed to Thyatira, but can we not see the similarities between this ancient church and various churches in today’s society? Jesus ends the letter with “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” These letters were meant to be read and taken as warnings for churches throughout history. How do we apply this specific letter to the church today? A quick note, this is the third time in 3 weeks that we have looked at a text that specifically addresses sexual immorality. Some may say or think that we are beating a dead horse, but that horse wasn’t dead back then nor is it dead today. This is still a problem in our current culture and society. And we should realize how important this battle is given how much Scripture speaks against it.

Point #1: We cannot tolerate nor allow false prophets to operate within our churches.

I think this is the most obvious takeaway from this letter. Christ charges the church with tolerance. Tolerance is the acceptance of something one disagrees with or dislikes. How quick is society in this day and age to accuse the church of intolerance? Aren’t we supposed to love as Christ did? So shouldn’t we just go about our business loving by tolerating? Absolutely not! Remember the list of the works of the church in Thyatira? Sure, it’s great and all, but Jesus still has this against them, that they would tolerate that woman Jezebel. What were they tolerating? Her teachings that were anti-scripture and therefore, anti-God! This isn’t some form of legalism, where Jesus is saying, “These works are great and all, but you’re allowing this to happen and so you aren’t good enough.” Instead, he is saying, “You do these works, and yet you tolerate those amongst you who do not trust me!” They have turned to the teachings of Jezebel and her children, in the hopes that they might prosper and have success. Jesus is saying “Turn to me instead! I can give you what you need!” We cannot allow anyone whose teachings are against God to operate in the church.

I want to be clear though. I am not suggesting we go on some witch-hunt and inquisition... even though no one expected the Spanish Inquisition. There may very well be “Jezebels” operating behind closed doors and they’re incredibly good at hiding. After all, there’s clearly an entire group of church members who have no idea who Jezebel and her children are or what they are teaching. Jesus alludes to this in v. 24 when he says “[those] who do not hold

to this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan.” So how do we know? What do we do?

We test those who would “prophesy” or teach against scripture. Guess what? God wins! Every time. Brothers and sisters, we should always be teaching one another and we should always be teachable. This is a normal part of the discipling relationships that take place within a church. But if someone attempts to teach something that does not align with scripture, our alarm bells should start going off. Remember the biggest lie in history began with the words, “Did God actually say...?” These words are still used today to justify all kinds of false teachings. Some have argued that the Bible doesn’t actually speak against homosexuality, just sexual immorality that isn’t really defined. “Does the Bible really address abortion?” The questions can go on and on... But ultimately, the Word of God does address these questions and teachings. So we must weigh the words of those who teach against scripture.

Point #2: Those who are not in Christ still have time to repent, but we know not how long.

Take note here (vv. 21-23) that Jesus has given Jezebel time to repent and she has not. We might think at first that this sounds a bit harsh. I mean, Jesus is now going to throw her onto a sickbed. She’s condemned and she is dying, so this sickbed is quite fitting. He says in v. 22 that those who commit adultery with her, he will throw into great tribulation and in v. 23, he will strike her children dead. There is no coming back from this. Jesus has enacted judgment on Jezebel and her children. But there are six important words mixed in and about this judgment. “unless they repent of her works.” With this judgment of Jezebel and her children, comes a promise to those who repent. By using this particular phrase, Jesus is saying that those who turn away from Jezebel’s teachings will be saved. Through the judgment of Jezebel and her children, those who repent will be saved by their placement of faith in Jesus instead of Jezebel and by their repentance.

Let me reel this back in a bit now and hopefully bring it all together. We have judgment and a promise of salvation within this section. How can Jesus tell us that he’s already condemned some but others can still be saved? The latter part of v. 23 holds that answer. Jesus says “all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart.” Jesus knows who will and who will not repent. Their works have been prepared beforehand and he will “give to each... according to your works.”

Brothers and sisters, we know not who will repent and who will not repent. We know not how long we have left. Therefore, we must encourage our lost friends, family, acquaintances, co-workers, whoever it may be... that they need to repent. They must turn away from sin and death and march towards Jesus and life. We must preach the Gospel message to all who would listen. And we must pray for them.

Point #3: Those who are in Christ must persevere and grow in our works.

Those who did not pursue the false teaching and idolatry have no further burden laid on them. Jesus tells them to only hold fast to what you have until He returns. These are the brothers and sisters who had not been led astray, nor had they permitted false teachers to

continue teaching (at least the ones they knew about). Jesus is saying, “continue holding your noncompromising stand.” They did not tolerate nor compromise nor allow these teachings to take hold.

It's quite fitting that Jesus opens with “Son of God” and alludes to Psalm 2 and that he closes the letter by once again alluding to Psalm 2. Those who persevere and grow, will reign with him. Those who are in Christ will share in this reign. This isn't just a guess or an idea like a maybe... It is a promise from Jesus himself in vv. 26-28. If we are in Christ, if we conquer/overcome, and if we keeps his works... Jesus himself will give us authority over the nations. How beautiful an ending that we would reign with him, not just under him. Just as Christ received authority from his Father, we will receive authority from Christ.

I know I briefly touched on the v. 29 mention of the morning star, but this verse reaffirms the promise made in vv. 26-28. Not only that, but I truly think it's one of those “fun facts” that this morning star could be linked with Rome (or evil empires such as Rome). I mean, how great is it that Christ is promising that no matter how bad society can get, we will overcome and conquer it? So long as we are in Christ, nothing can stand against him and therefore, nothing against us.

In closing, I want to implore you that if you have not repented of your sins and placed your faith in Christ, there is still time and hope. If we are not in Christ, we are like Jezebel, on a sickbed awaiting death. UNLESS we repent of her works... If you are a believer, then persevere and press on for the reward is great. May we grow in our works that flow from hearts of faith, love, service, and patient endurance.