

WILL WE COMPROMISE A LOT?
Jesus' Concerns for His Church
Dr. George O. Wood

Revelation 2:18-29. This is the fourth in the series of seven letters that Jesus sends to the churches of the Roman province of Asia Minor. They reflect Jesus' concerns for his churches then and his concern for his church now.

“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write, These are the words of the Son of God whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love, your faith, your service and perseverance and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I've given her time to repent of her immorality but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all of the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so called deep secrets. I will not impose any other burden on you. Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does my will to the end I will give authority over the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He will dash them to pieces like pottery. Just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Here is a letter to an unfamiliar place and a name that is difficult to even pronounce or remember, Thyatira. It is the fourth in a series of letters that Jesus is sending to his churches through the apostle John. The direct concern is the compromise in morals and values that has been going on in the church. The church is always in danger of persecution or if the enemy doesn't use persecution against the church he will attempt to infiltrate from within through seduction. The church at Thyatira had stood strong under external persecution but now it is coming unglued through the teaching in the church that is headed up by a woman in this letter named Jezebel.

In our day we have morals and values, matters that very much parallel those that were wrestled with by the Thyatira Christians. The church at Thyatira like the church today is dealing with all kinds of moral questions. A church cannot live in the world without dealing with morality and values.

Each of these letters that are written to the church are divided up by some letters that begin with C. The Character that Christ has. The commendation that he gives. The Criticism he makes. The Correction he offers. The Challenge he throws out. Most of the time we have looked at the letters in that order. Today I want to dive right in to the middle C and that is the Criticism that Christ offers for we do not understand the character by which he introduces himself or the challenge which he offers without understanding the criticism which he brings.

The Criticism is directed against a group in the church that is headed by a so-called Jezebel. I'm convinced that this was not her real name. Jezebel in the Old Testament was a Phoenician daughter of a king who married in a political alliance King Ahab of Israel and who through that

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inter marriage cause the Israelites to leave off the worship of Jehovah and along with that the introduction of pagan immorality and the worship of Baal.

The Lord gives this woman in the church who is holding a doctrine that is very similar to that which has been advocated by the Nicolaitans and the Balaamites, a group we looked at in the last letter, the letter to the Pergamum church. A group that was of compromise.

The real nub of the issue, no doubt arose over the fact that Thyatira had two important distinctions. One, it's placed geographically which we'll talk of in just a moment. But secondly an important distinction of Thyatira was that it was a town, which had a tremendous amount of middle class that produced goods. It was a trade union, guild union town. It was significant really in not any other way because it had not military defenses, it was not a key important city like Ephesus or Smyrna. But it was a manufacturing city. In order to hold a good job in that city you needed to be a member of trade union guild.

Some of the things that we know coming out of Thyatira there were wool workers and linen workers and makers of other garments and dyers and leather workers and tanners, potters, bakers, bronze-smiths. In Acts 16, the first Christian in Europe living in Greece was herself from Thyatira, a seller of purple, one of the products of that town.

In order to make a product you had to be a member of the guild, the trade union. But to be a member of that meant that you attended dinners at the pagan temples, dinners that began with written invitation you received that said, "The lord god patron god of Thyatira invites you to dine at his table." So when you're a Christian the first thing you see when you get an invitation to attend your labor union meeting was an invitation that began "The lord god invites you to dine at his table." And Christians only dined at the table of the Lord. Then if you went you would see an animal sacrificed to the God. You would eat that meat. You would drink the wine that had been offered as a libation or offering to the God. Then as the feast proceeded and people became loosened up with liquor gradually the revelry would begin and finally a full-scale feast of sensuality would ensue with relationships with priestess prostitutes that staffed the temple.

The fact of the matter was that unless Christians participated in the trade union guild they couldn't hold a job. It's one thing to say to a person, trust in the Lord. But when they've got three little kids at home to feed and their livelihood depends on their being a member of the trade union, they think twice about trusting in the Lord.

How will the church deal with this problem?

There arose a group in the church headed by this prophetess, so called Jezebel, who said, No problem at all. Just go along with it. She evidently came up with some sort of theologically sophisticated argument as to why Christians could participate in this immoral debauchery. Maybe she called it the "deep things of God." Kind of a license that said "Saturate your body in impurity that you may purify your soul... You'll never know how real grace is until you have really dipped in the well of sensuality."

I think probably she called it the deeper Christian life. That's why Jesus says "the deep things of Satan." It wasn't a deeper spiritual teaching at all. It was a deep teaching of Satan to corrupt the church.

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Whereas at Pergamum only a minority had gone on with the teaching of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans here at Thyatira a majority of the church it appears to have embraced this position. Compromise.

We face that in our day as well. I'm persuaded that a majority of evangelical church have not embraced the teaching which compromises. But we always struggle. There are those who skate on thin ice of compromise with the world. Can I still get a Christian and get forgiveness if I commit homosexual acts? If I commit fornication? If I go to X rated movies? If I watch X rated videos? If I gamble? If I get drunk? How much can I do and still call myself a Christian?

We're dealing with those issues as well in our day.

Jesus addresses this church by means of his character. He says some very profound things addressing this problem. He identifies himself three ways.

First of all he calls himself the Son of God. "These are the words of the Son of God." That's a very common phrase. We're tempted to trip right past that. Because we say in worship and in personal life a lot of times Jesus is the Son of God.

But interestingly enough when you read the book of Revelation which of all books sets forth the majesty and power of Jesus and how he has a throne that is higher than Caesar's throne and any throne that has ever been raised. When you study this book you will find that there is only one time in the whole book where the phrase Son of God is used. And it's used right here to church that's disobedient. Jesus is starting right off to a disobedient church and to a disobedient Christian by saying I want you to confront me with who I am. When you became a Christian you did not enter a democracy. Morals and values and right and wrong was not subject to a majority vote in the congregation. That has never been left up for grabs. When you came to me you came to a theocracy. You came to a king that was reigning and to the word of one person who by virtue of his resurrection has been guaranteed once and for all to tell us the truth when he speaks.

So our morals and our values are not grounded in some wise teacher. Our morals and values are grounded in the Son of God who by means of his resurrection has the authentic right to speak to us. We do not set in the position of judging our Lord or of telling him "Lord, we think you didn't mean us on that particular matter. You must mean other people don't commit fornication and adultery. Not me."

So the Lord must come to us. The Lord much prefers to come to us gently. He always tries to do this first. In the event that gentleness does not prevail, the Lord comes with a stern tone as he does here at Thyatira and he says, "I am the Son of God."

We're reminded right off on what terms we've come into the kingdom. He tells us that second quality of his character is that his eyes are like blazing fire. Within families we all know how much a look can sometimes communicate. We have Jesus looking at his church non-verbally flashing his eyes and telling with his eyes that he is penetrating the pseudo-sophistication of this church which is reveling in its compromise with the world.

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If that's not enough it says his feet have burnished bronze on them. One of the products made at Thyatira. And people were burnished bronze when they're going out to battle. They don't wear something soft like bedroom slippers or thongs or sandals. If they're going to have to kick some things in they're going to put some strong metal on their feet. If they're going to tread on scorpions they're going to put something strong on their feet. Jesus says I'm ready to come to you. I'm ready to come to you as the Son of God. My eyes are flashing and my feet are ready for battle. That tips us off as to the mood Christ is in, in regard to his church that is compromising, that has gone soft. He has not gone soft.

Wonderfully the Lord has some positive things to say about this church. Before we look at the correction he gives, he has a commendation to make. Because Jesus in the midst of all of our problems of life still sees the good points. He sees in this church its deeds, its love, its faith, its service and perseverance. And that it was doing more now than it did at first. I think that would be a great phrase of life. If you wanted to adopt a life slogan I couldn't think of anything better than to be able to say I am doing more now for Christ than I did at first.

Sometimes it's the opposite way around. A person may begin serving Christ in the initial days of discipleship and serving him with great fervor and strength. Then kind of over the years sort of retires in their Christian life. But here is church that can be commended for doing more now than they did at first. If that appellation doesn't describe where you and I are at today – more now than at first – it should. Great commendation to the church.

Then following this criticism which I've already indicated Jesus gives a correction. He says to Jezebel the head of this cultic group within the church, "I've given you time to repent." The Lord is gracious. He always gives us time to repent. When that time is past he's ready now to move in judgment. He says I'm going to cast those who commit adultery with you – he's not talking about physical adultery but spiritual adultery. Those who stood alongside Jezebel and been the leaders of her group. I'm going to throw you into a bed of sickness. I'm going to cause your children – not your five and six year olds but your initiates. The people who follow your teaching. Who are following you rather than my word. That's always a danger with Christians that they might start following a personality rather than what God tells us in his word. He says, I'm going to also judge you.

This is a severe word that the Lord speaks to the church. Saying to us the time is past where you can be a Christian on one hand and keep using cocaine on the other hand. Or be a Christian on one hand and engage in homosexual activity on the other hand. Or you can be a Christian on one hand and be involved in an affair on the other hand. Or you can be a Christian on one hand and be becoming drunk on the other hand. The Lord let's a dividing line go down through his church and says correct what is wrong.

I see in the New Testament there were churches that fight with legalism. Then there were churches that fight against libertarianism. The philosophy of, Let's do anything we want. When I was growing up it was more the fight with the legalistic heresy. It was always telling you what was wrong.

Jesus is always centered. He's balanced. At Galatia the legalists were winning out. But at Thyatira the libertarians were winning. Jesus is saying Correct. Come to balance.

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There's no real freedom without liberty and responsibility. Jesus is calling a church who wants liberty to also want responsibility.

He issues a challenge to the church. It's a challenge to overcome and a challenge to hear. He says "If you overcome I will give you authority over the nations and you'll rule them with an iron scepter." He says I'm going to put something in your hand and you're going to rule with me. We're princes and princesses in training. It's striking that Jesus told the Thyatira Christians that they were going to rule. It was not a ruling city. The fact is the town was kind of on the frontier. It was a level town. It as such an unimportant city geographically and militarily from the standpoint of being a capital center it had no acropolis. It was a flat place. And everybody knows that towns that didn't have natural defenses in ancient days kept getting overrun. That was the purpose of establishing Thyatira. It was meant to be overrun. It was meant to give Pergamum to the north and Sardis to the south time to defend themselves from an invading army to the east. Its purpose out there on the frontier was to let the other more well fortified and defended cities get ready for an invader. So time after time the hordes came in from the east and Thyatira was overrun. They burned the city, sacked it, looted it, killed its people. Then the new power would again rebuild the city because they needed it to anchor the defense parameter of the area. So it was a town that had never ruled anything.

Jesus said to a people in a town that had never ruled anything, You're going to rule. But ahead for the people of God is the position of rule. Ruling from a Christian perspective is not only eschatological but it is existential. It's in the age to come – it's future. But ruling is also meant to be now. So that when the Lord calls his church to have a no compromise position with the world he also intends to give his church the power to live the Christian life.

There is absolutely no substitute for the power of the Holy Spirit to keep our lives in a state of victory. We can try to live the Christian life on our own energy and willpower. That's why so many people find it difficult to live the Christian life because they envision it as one horrendous struggle where they're always on the losing end, caving in to the will and flesh and emotions. It takes a baptism in the Holy Spirit. It takes the power of the Holy Spirit. It takes a quickening, energizing power of the Spirit which is born out of a real intense counter with God in prayer to live the Christian life and live it powerfully. Jesus says I'm going to make you an overcomer. I believe that's not only good for the age to come; I believe that's good for right now.

If you're struggling with choices in your life between the world and God Jesus says if you real wholeheartedly commit to me and become hungry for my Spirit I'll give you power to rule.

Then he promises that the church will be given the Morning Star. Some people think that that means we're going to get to step on Satan's neck because in Isaiah he is called Day Star. That may well be. Other people look at Daniel and notice how Daniel says we're going to shine as stars of the morning and take it as a reference to the fact that we're going to be immortal. And that we certainly are. But the real meaning of Morning Star is repeated by Christ later in Revelation 22 where he identifies himself as the Morning Star. The Morning Star is simply that object in the sky line, which after all the other stars have disappeared from view that star alone remains shining. Jesus says when everything else has dimmed my star will not have dimmed. I'll be burning brightly.

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So Jesus in this promise of overcoming is promising us the two greatest things that we could ever want. That is activity, meaningful activity, and relationship. Meaningful activity is to rule. And relationship is the Morning Star. I'll give you myself, Jesus says.

So he draws it all to a close with an admonition to hear that he who has an ear, hear! If you look closely at these seven letters you'll find that in the first three the admonition to hear came before the admonition to overcome. But now beginning at Thyatira and through the rest of the letter the admonition to hear comes last. As it does on the Sermon on the Mount where when Jesus is done teaching everything says that the person who builds upon his teaching is the person who will survive. And he says, Let him who has an ear hear.

So let us who have ears hear the Lord and be faithful to him.

Father, we thank you today for your presence in our lives. We realize that none of us in this room is immune to temptation or to sin. Every one of us has a sin nature and it is only by virtue of your grace that we are ever declared righteous. Nothing in myself I bring, simply to thy cross I cling! There's not a one of us in this room if we were honest that has not compromised at least once in our life and perhaps more than that. If we've not got that compromise under the blood, Lord, we would come to you today and ask forgiveness for the times we've compromised our walk with you and our relationship with you. It is difficult at times to be totally loyal to you in the world in which we live. There are so many reasons that almost invent themselves that would give us justification for not being loyal to you. But Lord, we call you that because we've made a choice in our life to own you as Lord. To not live according to the dictates of our emotions or our willpower or what we think is reasonable and best. But to live by a law and rule of life that you've given to us. We're thankful that your yoke is easy and your burden is light. We pray for friends in this congregation today who are struggling with compromise in their own lives. There may be a difference between a Sunday profession and a weekday experience. Give us the power, Lord, to tighten up in our life. We want to have a determination in our heart to be like you. We're so glad that your grace covers us when we're not. But Lord within our heart there is a desire to have all the power of the Holy Spirit to live for you without compromise and to stand true. For Lord, ahead of us you set these great things out to conquer. And you give us yourself, the morning star. When we are in relationship with you then we can be satisfied. Thank you for your presence today. In Christ's name. Amen.