



# THYATIRA

## REVELATION 2:18-29

### **Lesson Focus**

Choosing not to participate in our day's political and economic idolatry will allow us to fully participate in God's mission of reconciliation and restoration of people and creation.

### **Lesson Outcomes**

Through this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the socio-economic setting of Thyatira.
2. Be encouraged to
3. Understand that the church's ability to remain distinct and faithful impacts its ability to fully participate in God's mission in the world.

### **Catching up on the Story**

In John's apocalyptic prophecy, we have been let in on John's vision of the heavenly throne room. We've noted some of the symbolism John uses as pointing to the churches of the world and Christ's presence among those churches. While many people read and encourage others to read Revelation as a book of doom and gloom, we noted that the work is a book of hope and encouragement amid times of trial and persecution. The wild imagery of Revelation was never meant to be taken literally but to describe both present and future realities. The faithful can remain faithful even at the risk of their life because God's Kingdom has come in Jesus Christ, and one day death and evil will be fully defeated.

After the heavenly throne room vision, John is instructed to write down what Jesus wants to say to the churches. Seven letters were written to seven different churches, struggling with similar yet different realities. While the numbers present in Revelation have meaning, they were never intended to be added up so that they might be used in predicting the future. The number seven represents complete wholeness. These seven letters aren't just to the churches specifically mentioned; they're also written to Christ's church everywhere.

### **Some Context: Son of a God**

The letter to the church in Thyatira begins in the same way as the previous letters have, with one small difference. The imagery used to describe the one writing the letter isn't taken from anywhere else in Revelation. Some context will be helpful as we seek to understand why

Jesus describes himself as he does.

First, Jesus describes himself as “the Son of God.” To you and I, reading this text after two thousand plus years of scriptural interpretation, the moniker may not sound odd or politically provocative. “Of course, Jesus is the Son of God; every Christian knows that!” It is more than likely that the Christians in Thyatira knew that, too. However, they did need to be reminded of what precisely that meant.

Thyatira was a relatively unimportant city within the Roman Empire. As with other places, Thyatira was home to many trade guilds. The city was especially known for its work in bronze. Trade guilds were an essential part of life in Thyatira, but these guilds often had patron gods who were worshiped in hopes that the god’s favor would grant its members prosperity. The guilds would have meetings that included a mixture of business, idol worship, and drunken revelry (Daniels, 76).

Several of the guilds claimed Apollo as their patron deity. What makes Apollo unique is that the people believed the emperor was the incarnation of Apollo. So, in Thyatira, both Caesar and Apollo were worshiped as “son of Zeus - son of the high god” (Daniels, 76). Emperor worship and commerce went hand in hand. To confess that Jesus was the “Son of God” proclaimed a different reality, a reality that claimed there was a power higher than the emperor, and to reject Caesar as lord meant rejection of and resistance to the empire. “This religious-political alliance heightened the risk for persons who tried to opt out of the Greco-Roman cultic infrastructure; rejection of the gods implied resistance to the state” (Blount, 62). Not only were there economic reasons to continue to participate in trade guilds, but there were also political ramifications.

“I know your works....”

After the introduction, Jesus begins to compliment the church for how they have worked in the world around them. Unlike the church in Ephesus, the church in Thyatira has led with love and faith. They have been faithful in service and patient in their endurance of persecution.

As often seems the case in life, a “but” follows Jesus’ generous compliment. Again, unlike the Ephesians, the Thyatiran Christians had not been so diligent in testing the validity and faithfulness of the teaching they were receiving. Jesus calls out a specific person, Jezebel. Likely, no one in the church is named Jezebel. Instead, as Jesus had done with Balaam in the letter to the church in Pergamum, Jesus is comparing a teacher within their church to the wicked queen Jezebel.

“The first Jezebel was immortalized as the manipulative foreign wife of

the Israelite king Ahab. The queen used her influence to prop up her native Baal cult, discredit and destroy the prophets of Yahweh, and lead the people idolatrously astray. The rival woman prophet of Thyatira was correspondingly influential.” (Blount, 63).

Two things need to be made clear before we look specifically at Jezebel’s sins. First, the false teaching leading the church astray comes from within the church. The church, then and now, is often led astray not by outside voices but by insiders who claim for themselves positions of authority based on knowledge or insight they claim to have received straight from God. These voices tend not to be accountable to anyone and can succeed in teaching whatever they want so long as they aren’t questioned. The message these leaders and teachers proclaim is often a message that people are eager to hear because it satisfies some longing or desire. This is precisely the case with Jezebel. While we cannot know what she was teaching or how she came to her authority position, we know that her message allowed for full participation in the trade guilds with their political and religious idolatry.

Second, the imagery of fornication and adultery is commonly used in the Old Testament to describe the unfaithfulness of God’s people. The prophet Hosea is a prime example of this motif. As with most of the images in Revelation, the stark vision in this letter is not meant to be taken literally. However, that is not to say that these Christians were not engaging in fornication, adultery, or eating food sacrificed to idols. If the Thyatirans were fully participating in trade guilds, they likely were engaged in those behaviors. Guild meetings were “[h]ighly influenced by the moral and sexual laxity of Roman culture, these events were almost always filled with drunken partying, in the spirit of ‘what happens at the guild stays at the guild’” (Daniels, 77). With that being said, I do not believe that the focus is on the behaviors but on the teaching which allowed these Christians to participate fully in Guild life.

### **“I gave her time to repent....”**

Beginning at verse 22, Jesus describes the fate that Jezebel and her “children” will find. Children not being Jezebel’s literal children, but those who follow her teaching. Jesus continues to use the stark imagery of adultery and fornication. As before, Jesus isn’t just condemning those practices; he’s describing the consequences that befall those who are unrepentant. Jesus has already given Jezebel time to repent, but she has not done so, and so she will be cast down on her bed in great distress.

We cannot miss the gracious offer of forgiveness Jesus offers Jezebel and her followers. As God had done so often with Israel, forgiving in patient faithfulness, God now does with his church. Jesus longs for all of

God's children to participate in the coming Kingdom of God.

One of the main issues at work in this letter is that Jezebel and her students are trying to straddle both sides of a fence. They've got one foot in the idolatrous practices of the world and the other foot in God's Kingdom. The message of this letter is clear. It is now time to pick a side.

### **"I will give authority...."**

Not everyone in Thyatira has succumbed to Jezebel's teaching. In verse 24, Jesus turns to address those in the church who have remained faithful. As with the other letters, the call is to tightly grip their faith and hope in the crucified yet resurrected Jesus.

The "deep things of Satan" to which Jesus refers is likely not specific teaching that Jezebel has proposed concerning Satan worship. Instead, the spirituality of the day often included mysteries that could only be known by those who attained a certain level of spiritual discipline. Daniels notes

It is possible that "the deep things of Satan" refers to the heresy of Gnosticism that posed an immense challenge to the faith of the early church. Not only were the Gnostics radical dualists who elevated the eternal soul and lowered the temporal body, but they also declared that a secret knowledge (gnosis in the Greek) was needed to free the soul from the body and allow it to enter into the realm of the eternal. It very well could be that Jezebel was offering a form of Gnosticism that not only freed people to do whatever they wished with their bodies but also promised a special knowledge or depth of insight not available to all (Daniels, 82).

The wonderful thing about the Christian faith is that what we need to know regarding salvation has already been fully revealed to us. At the same time, we may not know exactly how Jesus' death and resurrection brought about salvation for all of creation, but how to find that salvation is known. The Thyatirans need look no further than Jesus.

Finally, Jesus reveals to the church the reward for faithful discipleship by loosely quoting Psalm 2:8-9. The faithful will be given authority in God's already but not yet kingdom. Our English translations of the latter part of verses 26 and 27 give us the impression that the authority followers of Jesus will receive is political in the sense of ruling countries by setting up theocratic states. A closer look at the original language indicates that we could translate the quotation as, "I will give authority over the world's peoples, to shepherd them with an iron rod."

The difference is subtle but important. The scene shifts from nation-states to shepherds in a field guiding, leading, and protecting their flock. The reward for faithfulness to the way of Christ will result in a place of significance in the ongoing work of God in the world to bring about reconciliation and restoration of all people and things.

It is easy to read into these concluding verses a picture of some end-of-time rule of the world. It is that, but I think it's more. I think it is a statement regarding the place of the faithful church if it intentionally chooses to place itself in the Kingdom of God entirely. Trying to straddle the fence will only lead to our downfall. The effectiveness of the church and its ability to fully participate in God's mission in the world has always been tied to the church's decision to confess that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. It has always been connected to confessing that not participating in the political and economic idolatry of the world will not lead to death but life and life abundantly.

### **So What?**

The Christians in Thyatira struggled with how to participate fully in their world while remaining faithful to the Kingdom Jesus brings. They believed that they could innocently participate in the trade guild meetings with its political and economic idolatry. Since they believed that the gods those guilds worshiped were of no consequence, they could go through the motions of the meetings without raising any suspicions. The things we do routinely are formative, even when we don't give them much thought.

Regardless of the success of their ability to participate in their city's political and economic life without being soiled by it, their behavior showed that they did not trust that complete allegiance to Christ would be sufficient.

I wonder how much the church today is like the church in Thyatira? Do we blindly follow teachers who tell us what we want to hear? Have we become convinced that even though we know activity or practice is steeped in political or economic idolatry that it is acceptable to participate in it without consequence? Do we believe that as long as we believe the right thing, it doesn't matter what we do with our bodies or the bodies of others? Have our political and economic stances deeply hurt our ability to faithfully proclaim God's good news and participate in God's mission of reconciliation and restoration of creation and people?

Answering these questions is difficult. It's difficult because there seems to be no way to live in this world, to do business in it, without being soiled by it. But that doesn't give us a free pass, not if we're serious about

participating in God's work in the world. The question becomes, how do we minimize our complicity in the economic or political idolatry all around us? Of what things do we need to confess and repent?

### **Discussion Questions**

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. Why do you think Jesus refers to himself as "the Son of God?"
2. What similarities or differences might there be between the commendation Jesus gives Ephesus and Thyatira?
3. Who is Jezebel, and why does Jesus name the troublemaker in the church after her?
4. Jesus condemns Jezebel's teaching. What might she be teaching that is so wrong?
5. Jesus mentions fornication, adultery, and eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Is Jesus just talking about those sins, or are they metaphorical? What makes you think this?



11. The main problem the church in Thyatira struggled with was entangling themselves with the economic and political idolatry of the day, and it damaged their ability to truly participate in God's mission in the world. Has the church in the US done something similar? If so, how?

### **Works Cited**

Blount, Brian K., Revelation: A Commentary, ed. C. Clifton Black, M. Eugene Boring, and John T. Carroll, 1st Ed., The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

Daniels, Scott T., Seven Deadly Spirits: The Message of Revelation's Letters for Today's Church, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 2009.