

Revelation 2:18-29

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to the second passage that we read in the book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 2 and the passage there from verse 18, where we find the words that Jesus directs to the church in Thyatira. Now, Thyatira was, certainly in comparison to the other towns and cities that words are addressed to, was a bit of a nothing town. I guess I can say that in the confidence that there's unlikely to be any of the good citizens of Thyatira present here this morning to protest. I did wonder if I might try and compare it to a town in Scotland, but I thought that was far too risky to do, though I did have one or two candidates in mind that I'm not going to mention now, so I just leave you to ponder on what I might have suggested was a Scottish equivalent to Thyatira as a bit of a nothing town. It was a small town, but it does receive the longest letter. And I do wonder, and maybe this is somewhat speculative, but I do wonder if that does not perhaps tell us something about the value that Jesus places on those the world deems insignificant. The one other reference to Thyatira in the New Testament is in the book of Acts, in chapter 16, where we meet, and I quote, a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. Now, you'll remember Lydia, whose heart was opened to respond to Paul's message as he preached the gospel by the river outside the city gates of Philippi. Now, we don't know if Lydia returned to form part of the fledgling congregation in her hometown, but we do know that there was a largely uninterrupted Christian presence in Thyatira from the 80s in the first century right through to the beginning of last century, the 20th century, when in 1922 the Greek Orthodox congregation was expelled by the Turkish authorities. And really just of anecdotal interest, it's curious to note that the Greek Orthodox Church at that point established an archdiocese of Thyatira and Great Britain and appointed the first archbishop to govern over that archdiocese in London. And that arrangement continues to this day.

The current incumbent is Archbishop Gregorius. Well, that's really just of anecdotal interest. The structure that we find in the letter is similar to what we find in all the letters. It follows a regular, we might say even predictable pattern. And I don't know about you, but certainly for me, that fact alone can sometimes tend to lessen the impact, even when the actual content is distinctive.

You know, we read the letter and it kind of sounds like we've heard it all before. There's good things, there's bad things, there's warnings, there's the offer of reward. And yeah, it's just as the previous letters in terms of the structure and order. Let me try and present the material in the letter, at least some of the material in the letter, in a manner that I hope allows us to capture the heart of the message for the church in Thyatira when it was first delivered, but also for us today.

And I want to explore what the letter tells us about the church and what it tells us about Jesus, the head of the church. So, we'll start with the church. Notice two things that it says about the church. There's more than that, but we'll focus in or order what we have to say, highlighting two truths about the church, and then move on to identify two truths about Jesus and Jesus' dealings with the church. Now, as is usually the case in these letters, when we think about the church to which the words are being directed, there is good news and there is bad news. We can try and capture both the good and the bad news in one, I hope, easy to remember sentence. The church in Thyatira is commended for doing more and is urged to tolerate less. So, it's commended for doing more. You see the language there in verse 19, you are doing more than you did at first. So, they are commended for doing more, but they are then urged to tolerate less. And in that way, let's order what we want to say and what is in the letter in these two regards. First of all, they are commended for doing more. The believers are doing more than they did at first. Now, that immediately kind of presents a contrast with the church in Ephesus, who are urged to do the things you did at first. Remember when we were thinking about Ephesus, whenever it was, two or three weeks ago, and that was one of the criticisms, or one of the, that's not one of the criticisms, but they were being urged to return to do what they did at first.

Clearly, they were no longer doing what they did at first, quite the reverse in Thyatira. We're told, Jesus tells them, you're doing more than you did at first. And this is good. There is growth, and growth is a sign of life. This is a living church. But what are they doing more of? Well, presumably, that doing more relates back to their deeds. Notice there in verse 19, I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. So, this is a reference to deeds, and Jesus says, you're doing more. So, presumably, the reference particularly is to those very deeds that have just been mentioned.

[6 : 21] And what are these deeds? Well, there are two couplets, I suppose. They're love and faith, and they're service and perseverance. And I think we can detect a logical order in these two couplets.

We might say the root and the fruit. As believers rooted in love for Jesus and faith, trust in Jesus, they then produce the fruit of service to others and perseverance in the face of untold and manifold difficulties. And they're commended for this. They're commended for these deeds that are growing day by day or year by year. And the words that we find here, those things that they are commended for, they're so familiar. Love, faith, service, perseverance. And again, their very familiarity means that we can perhaps skim over this commendation as unremarkable. And yet, here we have the heart of the matter, loving Jesus, loving our neighbor, trusting in Jesus in good times and in bad times, serving those around us, persevering in the faith. And so, it is a good thing that Jesus is able to say about the church in Thyatira. And I wonder if we were to do an audit on ourselves as a church, as a congregation, could Jesus speak likewise of us? Could we be likewise commended? I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and perhaps particularly telling, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Is that true of us? Well, that's the good news. But of course, there's also, as we've become accustomed in these letters, not always, but normally, there's also bad news. Nevertheless, there in verse 20, nevertheless, I have this against you. They need to tolerate less.

They've been doing more, and that's good, but they need to tolerate less. And we do need to tackle the bad news. Again, more of curiosity or anecdotal interest, I was exploring the website of the Archdiocese of Thyatira and Great Britain that I mentioned just a few moments ago. And there's an article there by the present archbishop on the history of the archdiocese. And the article begins with the archbishop quoting from this letter in Revelation, and that seems fitting and maybe quite predictable. But can you guess what verses the archbishop quotes when he begins his article on his archdiocese? Well, I guess if you thought about it, you might be able to guess. Well, he quotes verse 19 and all this good stuff about Thyatira, and then he jumps to verse 25, hold on to what you have until I come. And that's it. That's all that is referenced by Archbishop Gregorius, just the good stuff. Now, in fairness, as I went on to read the whole article, he does make some reference to some of the bad stuff as well. They are doing more, but they need to tolerate less. The bad news is that they are, as a church, I think this is a kind of corporate guilt of the church in its totality. It's not so much directed at individuals. Individuals are doing some bad things, but the charge to the church is that as a church, they are too tolerant. Now, this seems a very strange accusation, perhaps especially in the brave new world of 21st century Scotland, where we are sure tolerance is the greatest virtue. It's a good thing. That's what we're encouraged to do. We need to tolerate more. Just be more open and more tolerant, and everything would be fine. You know, and the likes of us who hold on to antiquated views, we're so intolerant, we're told. The great virtue is tolerance. Well, here very curiously, the criticism of the church in Thyatira is that they're too tolerant. They're tolerant of that which they ought not to be tolerant of. Of course, that's the key, isn't it, in this question of tolerance.

There is, of course, a rightful and healthy place for being tolerant, but the key issue is what we tolerate. Well, what was the church at Thyatira wrongly tolerating? Well, we're told there in verse 20, nevertheless, I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet.

Now, the identity of the woman is immaterial. What matters is her teaching. There's reference there to her teaching in verse 20, by her teaching, she misleads, and then further on in the letter, her teaching is once again referenced. Well, what was her teaching? Well, the name, or perhaps more likely, the nickname that she has given, Jezebel. My own sense is that this was a real woman, an actual person, not just a name that represents maybe a spirit within the congregation or a bad tendency within the congregation. It seems reasonable to think this was a real person, but this is not

her real name. This is a nickname that she has given, and the nickname does, of course, provide us with a clue. Jezebel is an Old Testament character. She was the pagan wife of King Ahab, the king of Israel, and Jezebel incited her husband to encourage the Israelites to worship the Baal.

[12 : 26] And we can read of that incident or that occasion in 1 Kings chapter 16. Now, the key element in this allusion to Israel at the time of Ahab and Jezebel is that they tried to worship Yahweh and Baal.

Jezebel wasn't saying to her husband, let's get rid of Yahweh and let's replace Yahweh with Baal. No, that wasn't her strategy, shall we say. Jezebel's strategy was, yeah, by all means, let's worship Yahweh. Yahweh, oh, he's a great God. You can worship Yahweh. But how about a little bit of Baal worship on the side? You know, we can do both. You know, we can be tolerant. We can be open-minded. Why so narrow? Why just Yahweh? Let's worship Baal as well. This was what Jezebel was trying to do and indeed succeeded in doing because of the weakness of her husband. The sin Jezebel in the Old Testament encouraged was really that of compromise, the doomed endeavor to serve two masters. Now, the Thyatira and Jezebel was no doubt intent on encouraging similar compromise. It seems that in Thyatira, the compromise involved participation in pagan rituals, in the eating of food sacrificed to idols there that is spoken of in verse 20 that we've already come across in previous letters.

This participation in pagan rituals was, in all probability, connected to the banquets or ceremonies organized by the trade guilds that were found in that city. No doubt one of them was a guild dedicated to the production and sale of purple cloth that Lydia was involved in.

And Jezebel, perhaps twisting the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 8, where he assures his readers that they were free to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Now, there the idea was if that meat happened to appear at the butcher's, well, you could buy it and eat it and there was no problem. It's just meat after all. And possibly Jezebel would say, no, even Paul says it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols, so let's go along to these ceremonies. Let's participate in these banquets. Let's be involved in this pagan worship. It doesn't really matter. These gods don't really exist. You know, we know that there's only one true God, but what does it matter if we participate? And of course, this teaching of Jezebel was very attractive to many of the Christians in Thyatira because it seemingly provided spiritual justification for participating in these pagan rituals because to refuse to do so carried economic and social consequences. If you didn't participate, you could be ostracized, you could be isolated, and it could impact on your own business and on your own economy. And so, if somebody come and say, oh, I have deep secrets, I have great knowledge that allows me to assure you that it's okay, was attractive to some. As we notice in verse 24, there's a reference there to Satan's so-called deep secrets. And there's possibly here an element of irony in the language of Jesus as he acknowledges that this Jezebel, this woman was saying, oh, I have deep knowledge about this. You know, I have particular insight from God about this matter, deep secrets. She, of course, didn't call what she was teaching Satan's deep secrets. Jesus says that's what it actually is, though it may be marketed by her in a different way. So, this was the problem. The Christians were being lured by this false teaching and were engaging in what unstopped would be nothing short of spiritual suicide. They were playing with fire and the church said nothing. And this was the problem, tolerating compromise and turning a blind eye to the immorality that often accompanied these pagan rituals. I wonder if the leaders of the church in

Thyatira felt that all the good stuff in the church, and there was. Jesus acknowledges that. I wonder if they thought that that somehow outweighed the bad stuff. And of course, quite possibly, the bad stuff was hardly visible at church. It was what some of the believers were doing in their own time in the course of their own daily business and routine. You know, if this did involve participating in these pagan rituals, well, the Christians or some of them could do so, you know, quietly without making a big song or dance about it. And Sunday services were just as usual. And maybe the leader said, well, it's not that big a deal. Why make a big fuss about it? Why meddle? Why risk offending other believers? Is that not the great sin of our day? We must never offend anybody. And maybe the leaders in Thyatira said, well, we don't want to offend anybody. Live and let live. Respect folks' freedom of conscience. But they were wrong.

[17 : 53] And Jesus has this against them, that they tolerate this teaching. They are tolerating this compromise. What about us? In what ways can we be guilty of God dishonoring compromise? Perhaps in the manner that we can play fast and loose with the truth, perhaps in a work situation where it is deemed convenient to be less than truthful. Perhaps we are tempted to go with the flow

in the matter of sexual ethics and say, we know better than God as to the use of that great gift from God. Or perhaps we compromise in our pursuit of wealth and success, trying to serve God and money. Perhaps our desire to be liked and accepted leads us to compromises of one kind or another. The church was doing more, but they urgently needed to tolerate less. But let's move on to Jesus, the head of the church. What do we discover about Jesus? Well,

Jesus presents Himself as the one who does two things. He punishes justly and He rewards generously. This is an attempt to capture really quite a lot that we have here. But these two things, let's focus on these two things. Jesus punishes justly and rewards generously. And we'll begin with the first of those.

But before we do, note how Jesus identifies Himself at the beginning of the letter. These are the words of the Son of God. Now, this is the first time that Jesus expands on the language and imagery of the vision in chapter 1 and adopts at the beginning of a letter a divine title for Himself, the Son of God. In all the previous letters to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, Jesus identifies Himself using the language of the vision in chapter 1 and leaves it at that. Here for the first time, He also explicitly identifies Himself as the Son of God.

And no doubt the reason that He does so is to pave the way for going on to identify Himself as the Son of God spoken of in Psalm 2 that we were reading a little earlier. And He also employs the language of the vision, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. And the significance of this description will become apparent, I hope, in a moment. First of all then, Jesus punishes justly.

Jesus punishes justly, and let's be honest, severely. Listen to the language employed in the course of this letter. Speaking about this woman Jezebel, I will cast her on a bed of suffering. Speaking of her followers, they will suffer intensely. And then perhaps the most shocking and difficult for us to even digest of them all, I will strike her children dead. Come again? This is brutal. Is this really the Jesus we know and love? I think we need to take a step back and detect the process followed by Jesus in executing judgment or punishing justly. And there are really at heart two parts to the process.

[21 : 18] First of all, there is a call to repentance. And then in the absence of repentance, there is the application of punishment. And the call to repentance is extended even to Jezebel. Even this woman who has done so much harm, who has wreaked havoc in the church in Thyatira, what does Jesus say about her?

There in verse 21, I have given her time to repent of her immorality. I have given her time. I want her to repent. I don't want to punish her. I don't want to strike her down. I've given her time to repent. She has been warned. I have ensured that there have been those who have approached her and challenged her. I've given her time to repent, but she is unwilling. There is the opportunity to repent and be spared the punishment, to be delivered from the judgment of God. This opportunity and invitation to repent is also extended to her followers. There in verse 22, we read, so I will cast her in a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit adultery with her, presumably those who were following her teaching, I will make them suffer intensely unless they repent of her ways. Her ways as in the ways that she was promoting and that they were adopting. And again, there's this opportunity to repent that is being given. Indeed, this very letter, you could say in great measure, is a further opportunity to repent that is being extended. The pronouncement of judgment is conditional on the response. These things have not yet happened. And so there is another, perhaps we might say one final opportunity being extended to Jezebel, to her followers, to repent. So that's the first stage in the process. But then there is a second stage. In the absence of repentance, judgment follows. But we need to know two key aspects of

Jesus' judgment. It's real, it happens, it's inescapable in the absence of repentance. But notice two aspects of it that are very important for us to be very clear on. First of all, the judgment of Jesus. When Jesus punishes, it is grounded in perfect knowledge. Notice what Jesus says there when He is speaking in verse 23, when He's pronouncing this very somber judgment. It says there in the second half of the verse, then all the churches will know that I am He who searches hearts and minds. What is Jesus saying there? Jesus is saying, when I judge, when I punish, it is grounded in perfect knowledge of what has happened, of guilt, of the sin that has been committed. We know that human justice can never, ever be grounded in perfect knowledge. There are, in our courts, miscarriages of justice, often unintentional. And why? Because we don't have perfect knowledge. No judge has perfect knowledge. You know, witnesses can lie. Lawyers can confuse the picture

and present a defense that ensures the guilty escape, scot-free, and so on.

But what Jesus is saying is that His judgment is grounded in perfect knowledge. He knows our hearts and minds. He doesn't know the actions that have taken place. No, the evidence that He calls upon is from the very depths of your heart and soul and mind. He knows everything. And when He punishes, it is grounded in perfect knowledge. Hence, the blazing eyes that He speaks of as He introduces this letter.

I am the one who has blazing eyes that pierce to the very depth of your being. That's the first thing to be very clear about. But the second thing is that the judgment of Jesus is marked by perfect justice. You see, what does He go on to say there in verse 23? And here He is addressing everybody. He says this, I will repay each of you according to your deeds. What Jesus is saying is, when I judge, when I punish, it is fair. I repay according to your deeds. There will be no room for anybody to protest and say, well, that's not fair. Maybe some will protest, but the protest will have no basis in reality because when Jesus judges, He repays according to our deeds. We will never be punished for something we didn't do. We'll never be punished when we didn't deserve to be punished.

[26 : 37] The judgment of God is grounded in perfect justice and perfect knowledge. Now, this is true of Jesus' acts of temporal judgment in the here and now, and it will be true of Jesus' judging when He returns to judge the living and the dead. That would be you and me, just for the avoidance of debt. He will judge according to His perfect knowledge and in accord with perfect justice. Maybe just to clarify one point of the very shocking language that Jesus employs here, when Jesus here speaks of striking down Jezebel's children, the reference here isn't to innocent infants, but her followers, and perhaps especially her most intimate followers described here as her children, those who have adopted her teaching and are guilty of that which He is promoting.

Now, we all need to get to grips with this reality that Jesus judges justly. We have all sinned. We are all called to repentance. If we repent, Jesus will joyfully forgive us. But if we refuse to repent, we will be justly punished. And so, I would urge you, repent of sinful compromise and trust in your forgiving Savior. But then finally, let's just notice the second thing that we discover about Jesus. He punishes justly, but He also rewards generously. Now, who does Jesus reward? Well, they're identified in the letter in verse 24.

We read, now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira. And then He goes on to say two things about the ones He's addressing that are interesting. He says, you who do not hold to her teaching, who have not followed along Jezebel's line of compromise, you don't hold to her teaching. But then He goes on to say that they are those who hold on to what you have. Then in verses 24 and 25. And maybe you can see there that the striking symmetry. Those rewarded are those who do not hold to false teaching, but rather hold to the unadulterated gospel, what you have. They hold on to Jesus and the good news of the gospel. They don't trifle with deep secrets or new wisdom, but cling to the truth once and for all delivered to the saints.

They hold on to that. They reject falsehoods and lies and compromises. They say, no, we will have no track with that. We will remain firm on the gospel that we have been given. We will guard that deposit.

We will pass it on to the next generation. Those rewarded are also described as victorious. Then in verse 26, to the one who is victorious or to the one who overcomes. But notice the nature of their victory. I think the nature of their victory is described in what follows. To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end. That's all that Jesus asks of them. It's all that He asks of us.

[29 : 57] Do my will to the end. You know, the believers in Thyatira who were faithful, they perhaps weren't able to point to spectacular achievements for Jesus, but they were faithful and obedient to the end, just like Jesus, who was obedient even unto death. And Jesus is urging you today, know the truth, hold on to the truth. Live the truth. Be faithful to the end. Keep on keeping on. This is who Jesus rewards. But what is the generous reward given by Jesus? Well, there are two elements, sharing in the authority of Jesus and enjoying the presence of Jesus. In verses 26 and 27, we have this language that Jesus employs where there's this reference to those who are being rewarded, sharing in His authority. I will give authority over the nations. Then in verse 26, what does this mean? Well, Jesus refers to Psalm 2.

And there in the key section of the Psalm, Psalm 2 and verses 7 to 9, we have this language of authority being given by the Father to the Son. I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. And so the picture being painted is of the Father granting to the Son

authority over the nations. And there seems to be almost a dynamic of cascading authority. The Father grants authority to the Son, and the Son in turn now grants His authority to His people. He's addressing His people, and He says, I will give authority. I've received authority, and now I give authority. What does that look like? Well, let me suggest a present and a future application. In the present, this granting of authority to His people over the nations seems to echo the language of the Great Commission.

Matthew chapter 28, right at the end of that chapter, what did Jesus say to His disciples? He said this, Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. This is what Psalm 2 is talking about. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations. You see the parallel there. The Father grants authority to the Son, the Son grants authority to His people. In what way? In the here and now? Well, perhaps principally. In the authority that we are given to conquer the enemies of God with the gospel, with good news, not with swords, not with violence, but with good news. Telling people about Jesus and making disciples is the gospel way of conquering the enemies of Jesus. We defeat them by making them Jesus' friends. But there is, I think, a future aspect that looks forward to the visible victory of Jesus over the nations, over all His enemies, and the establishing of His visible and eternal kingdom. And we, His people, will share in that victory. That also seems to be implied in the language of this letter. What is a generous reward given by Jesus? Well, sharing in His authority, but also enjoying His presence. See there in verse 28, I will also give that one the morning star. Who is the morning star? What is the morning star? Well, Jesus answers that question in this very same letter, in this very same book of Revelation. In chapter 22 and verse 16 we read, and Jesus is speaking, and He says this, I am the root and the offspring of David and the bright morning star. What is our most precious reward for being faithful? Jesus Himself. Perhaps even in the use of this designation as the bright morning star, there is a polemical twist, no doubt intended to encourage a church battling against the pomp and power of Rome. You see, Roman emperors claim to be descended from Venus, identified by them as the morning star. And here Jesus reveals Himself as the genuine article, the eternal morning star, the only and absolute ruler over the kings of the earth. And He gifts Himself to His people. I will give you the morning star. I will give you Myself. As we draw things to a close, maybe I can just pose you this question. Are you finding it tough to be a Christian? Is it difficult to be faithful, to not compromise? Jesus knows. Jesus cares. Love Him. Trust in Him. Be faithful to Him. And He will be your most precious reward. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your Son. We thank You for Jesus.

[35 : 14] We thank You for the reality of who He is, the Son of God, the one with blazing eyes, who knows us, who sees us into the very depths of our soul. We thank You that He is the God who tenderly and urgently invites us to repent of our sins and to experience and know the forgiveness that He is ever ready and able to grant. And we pray that we would not be unwilling, but rather that we would willingly flee from sin and flee to Jesus. We thank You for the great reward that is ours, not because of any merit of our own, but because of Your unbounded generosity. We thank You for the authority that we have been given to share the good news of the gospel with others, that the enemies of God might become His friends. We thank You above all for Your presence with us. We thank You for Jesus.

We thank You for Your Spirit. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.