

This morning we will consider Jesus' words to the Church in Thyatira. We are working our way through the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation was originally a message from Jesus to the churches spread out throughout the Roman empire near the end of the first century. Jesus ascended into heaven in the 30s of the first century. Paul was active as a missionary during the late 30s to the early 60s. The first churches were established from the late 30s to the 50s. The churches that the book of Revelation addresses had been around for some decades. Throughout this time there had been sporadic persecution. The context of the book of Revelation is the spiritual warfare between the church and the world and the suffering that the church would have to endure.

In chapters 2-3 of the book of Revelation, the exalted and reigning Jesus Christ addresses 7 existing churches, but by addressing these seven he is addressing all churches. We are all to hear what Jesus says to each of the seven churches in these chapters and evaluate our own church and our own lives in the light of what Jesus says. We have come to the fourth church on the list – the Church in Thyatira.

This is how Jesus describes himself in his opening words to this church. "The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze." The phrases "[E]yes like a flame of fire and ... feet ... like burnished bronze" repeat parts of the John's description of the vision of the glorified Christ recorded in chapter 1. The idea expressed by "eyes like a flame of fire" that of an all-seeing judge. Later on, in his message to the church of Thyatira, Jesus says, "I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works." "Feet like burnished bronze" refers to Jesus' moral purity. The literal translation of burnished bronze is "bronze that has been fired in a furnace." (Beale, 209-210) And the idea of metal fired in the furnace has to do with purity. Metal fired in a furnace had all the impurities burnt away. Of course, Jesus had no impurities to be burnt away, but the point is that Jesus was perfectly pure and holy.

So we get a picture of the exalted Christ as a holy judge who sees all. "The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze." This is who is speaking to the church in Thyatira. And this is who is speaking to us this morning. When the word of God is read and preached, Jesus himself is speaking to us and what we have just covered is part of how he wants us to think of him. He is our perfectly holy, all seeing judge.

Of course, he is also our Saviour if we are believing on him. In this passage, Jesus is not addressing the world. He is speaking to the church – his people – the people for whom he died. But clearly, he judges his people. He sees all and he evaluates what he sees. Some of what he sees pleases him. Some of what he sees displeases him. And from this passage we see that some of what he sees in the visible church comes under his judicial wrath.

But first he mentions what pleases him. "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first." This is a nice little summary of what Jesus is looking for when he sees and evaluates his church: works, love, faith, service, patient endurance and growth. We are

not saved by works, but we are saved in order to do works. Ephesians 2:10 says “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

We are saved to do good works. We are saved to work – to do good works. Here is a nice definition of good works: “Acts designed specifically to benefit others, which are characteristic of God. He requires and enables his people to do good, although such is contrary to their sinful nature. Salvation does not depend on good works, but leads to them” (Dictionary of Bible Themes).

Good works – acts designed specifically to benefit others – that is what we are saved to do. Christians are “created in Jesus for good works.” We are created in Jesus to do things that benefit others.

This is what Jesus saw going on in the church at Thyatira and it pleased him. I know that Jesus sees good works when he looks at Riverside, but the question for each of us is whether he sees good works when he looks at our lives. How much do we do that is designed specifically to benefit others?

Jesus also saw love and service, but those are close to works so I won't comment on them now.

Jesus also mentions faith.

Faith is what we must do to be saved. Faith is receiving the promise of salvation in Christ and entrusting our eternal wellbeing to God's faithfulness to his promises. But faith is also an ongoing reality in the Christian life. A huge part of the Christian life comes down to trusting Jesus – trusting God – trusting what he says about himself in the Bible – trusting his promises – trusting his wisdom – trusting his love. Life has its difficulties. There may be persecution. There will be suffering of one form or another. There will be setbacks in life. There will be things that we don't understand. Circumstances will make it difficult to believe that God is in control or, if he is, that he loves us. Sometimes our own sins will make it difficult to believe that he will really forgive us through trusting in Jesus. God tells us not to worry about our future – not to be anxious about anything. There are all kinds of ways that God requires trust from us. Jesus notices it when it is there, and it pleases him.

Jesus also mentions patient endurance. This is also a big deal in the Christian life. You don't get anywhere in life without patient endurance. Pursuing anything worthwhile take effort over the long haul. That is also true of the Christian life. Paul refers to this in Galatians 6:9 where he says, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

An awful lot of the time we do not feel like doing good. Often we feel like doing nothing instead of doing good or doing something for ourselves instead of doing something to benefit others. If we are going to live a life that pleases Jesus, it will take patient endurance. Often it means doing what we should do rather than what we feel like doing. There are of course times when it is right and good to do what we feel like doing and to do something for ourselves, but that usually does not take patient endurance. Patient endurance is for that part of the Christian life that requires self-discipline and self-denial.

And finally, in this verse Jesus mentions that the “latter works exceed[ed] the first.” This is the opposite of what Jesus said to the Church at Ephesus which had “abandoned the love that [they] had at the first.” Jesus told them to repent and “do the works [they] did at first” (Ephesians 2:5). Here at Thyatira the saints that Jesus is commending were growing in their zeal so that their “latter works exceed[ed] the first.” So they were growing in love and zeal.

That’s encouraging because it shows that it is possible for believers to grow in enthusiasm and zeal rather than decline. It is not inevitable that we lose enthusiasm for serving the Lord and others. Growth is what Jesus expects of his people. He expects that our latter works will exceed our first works.

Psalm 91:12-14 is a beautiful expression of this idea. “The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green.” The Bible sees the life of God’s people as one of gradual growth. Decline is a problem. Coasting is a problem. We are expected to make progress. We are given all that we need to make progress. We have the Holy Spirit to empower us. We have the means of grace: the word and sacraments and prayers. We have the encouragements that come with belonging to a congregation where there are examples to inspire us, oversight to keep us accountable, and fellowship to encourage us. So what Jesus says here about the members of the church in Thyatira - that their “latter works exceed the first” - is both an encouragement and an exhortation to continue to strive to grow in fruitfulness in the service of God.

However, all is not well in Thyatira. Like the church in Pergamum there was a problem with church discipline. Verse 20 says, “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.” Verse 21 “I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.” Jezebel was a wicked queen in the OT who encouraged the worship of Baal in Israel. There was a woman in the church in Thyatira who was a Jezebel – who was like Jezebel. She claimed to be a prophetess and she was teaching a message that weakened Jesus’ call to holiness and thus encouraged idolatry and sexual immorality.

Thyatira was a city that had many trades-people and those in the trades organized themselves into guilds and those guilds had a religious component to them. It is thought that this woman was teaching that it was ok for Christians to be part of those organizations and participate in the worship that went along with those organizations. Perhaps she taught that it was ok just to go through the motions because that was the cost of doing business. That may also have included the sexual immorality that was so often part of pagan worship.

So there was this woman in the church, and she was teaching that it was ok for Christians to engage in a little pagan worship so that they would not be hindered in the pursuit of their livelihoods. And what Jesus has against the church in Thyatira is that they tolerated this woman. They did not discipline her.

Now I have already spoken about the importance of church discipline in connection with Jesus' message to the church in Pergamum. I won't repeat that here. I want to reflect on our own situation in the light of what Jesus says here about this woman who was influencing members of the church to engage in idolatry and sexual immorality. It is hard to imagine a situation exactly like this happening in any faithful church today – which includes taking church discipline seriously. In a church that practices church discipline you are not likely to encounter a situation like what Jesus is describing here.

What we do have, however, are churches and whole denominations in the broader Christian church which are presenting false teaching that does encourage idolatry and sexual immorality. I'm thinking for instance of churches that teach the prosperity gospel which holds that God's will is for his people to be wealthy and neglects the biblical teaching on self-denial and suffering. The prosperity gospel is rooted in the idolatry of wealth and material prosperity. It is just a version of the world in its idolatry of wealth and prosperity. Also there are many churches today that teach that homosexuality is a God-honoring lifestyle. That is a form of approving of sexual immorality. Certainly, Jesus' words of condemnation apply those such churches in our world.

But I want us to think in a different direction. Jesus' concern here is about the church tolerating a person in the church who was influencing the members of the church in the direction of idolatry and sexual immorality. We live in a situation where we are bombarded with influences towards idolatry and sexual immorality, but those influences are not subject to church discipline because they come from outside of the church. The question that we need to ask ourselves is whether we are tolerating Jezebel in our homes by what we watch and read and hear – the programs we watch, the advertisements that we watch and listen to, the books and magazines and internet content that we read, the programs that we listen to, and the music we listen to.

We may not be tolerating a Jezebel in our church, but the devil has devised ways to get Jezebel-like influences into our homes and into our earbuds and onto our phones. The danger that we face from what is available to us through technology is far greater than the Jezebel in Thyatira who was seducing the members of the church to practice sexual immorality and idolatry. The elders of the church cannot discipline the source of that seduction. The elders cannot monitor your intake of the media although it is clearly appropriate for them to ask what you are watching and listening to and reading.

But it is a legitimate application of this passage to ask whether we are tolerating Jezebel-like influences towards idolatry and sexual immorality. Much of what is available for us to watch, listen to and read tempts us to idolatry and sexual immorality. Much of what is available for us to watch, listen to and read depicts sexual immorality as normal and good and that influences us. Much of what is available for us to watch, listen to and read depicts idolatry in favorable ways and that influences us.

Idolatry is living for anything other than God. Pretty much everything that is available for us to watch, listen to and read (that is not Christian) promotes a man-centered view of life – living for money – living for pleasure –

living for self – finding yourself – following your dreams – these are the themes we are exposed to in the media – even in advertising and it seeks to shape us in ways that are contrary to the God-centered, self-sacrificial and holy way we are called to live.

This text calls us to ask ourselves what kinds of Jezebel-like influences we are tolerating in our homes and on our phones. How much of what we see and listen to and read seduces us to practice sexual immorality and idolatry. This passage makes it clear that Jesus has this against us if we tolerate teaching and seduction that, like Jezebel, encourages sexual immorality and living life apart from God – living for self – living for this life.

What Jesus says next is very sobering. Verse 22. He is speaking about the Jezebel mentioned in verse 20. “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, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches the mind and heart, and will give to each of you according to your works.”

These are strong words. Clearly Jesus feels very strongly about this. And he is speaking about punishment. “I will throw her onto a sickbed” means that Jesus will punish her with sickness or some other form of suffering. Those who follow her Jesus “will throw into great tribulation” unless they repent. “And [he] will strike her children dead.” Her children are her followers. Jesus is talking about punishment for all who do not repent. The great tribulation in this context is the same tribulation that the faithful will have to endure, but the meaning is different. For the faithful the great tribulation is testing, and they are protected by God in it. For those who refuse to repent the great tribulation is a foreshadowing of hell. It is punishment. That is what Jesus is referring to here. The strong language gives us a sense of the wrath of Jesus against the Jezebels of this world and those who follow them and the focus here is particularly on the Jezebels who are operating within what claims to be the Christian church. Let us tremble at the reality of the wrath of the exalted Christ against those who seduce others to idolatry and sexual immorality and those who follow them.

But then the mood changes. Verse 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. Verse 25, “Only hold fast what you have until I come.” Thankfully not all in the church follow the temptations of idolatry and sexual immorality. Jesus refers to some who do not hold to Jezebel’s teaching. They are the ones whom Jesus has commended in his opening words: “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.”

These people are not sinless. It is not that they are completely free from idolatry and sexual immorality. But their lives are different from the followers of Jezebel. Faithful believers are not sinless. But they are not living in sin. They are serious about fighting sin. They are serious about doing good works and loving God and people and walking by faith and serving others and pressing on in spite of the struggles and they are gradually growing like the tree planted by rivers of water. Thankfully believers are forgiven because of what Jesus has done for them so that their status before God is not based on their works but Jesus’ works. But also,

thankfully, their lives are different from the lives of unbelievers because Jesus is at work in them through his word and Spirit and so there is fruit in their lives.

And to such people Jesus says “I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come.” Hold fast your works, love, faith, service, patient endurance and continue to grow until Jesus returns.

And as an encouragement he says, “The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 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.”

Now the language of this promise is rooted in Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is a particularly important Psalm that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is what God says to his Son in verses 8-9 of Psalm 2. “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.” These verses are speaking of Jesus’ victory over the nations who rage “against the LORD and against his Anointed.” This is a huge theme in the book of Revelation – Jesus’ victory over the nations that rage against him.

And Jesus, in our text, promises to those who conquer and keep his works to the end that they will share in his rule over the nations. “The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces.” Those who suffer with Christ to the end will reign with Christ as Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 2:12.

Now this reigning is the fulfillment of the dominion that God gave to Adam and Eve in paradise. We have been created in the image of God to have dominion over the earth. That is fulfilled in Jesus and those who conquer will share in that in the age to come. Part of this will mean the saints participating with Christ in judging the world. That begins now already through the proclamation of the gospel which asserts the authority of Jesus Christ and is used by God to usher in his kingdom. The gospel is good news for those who receive it, but it also condemns those who reject it. So proclaiming the gospel is participating with Christ in his rule over the nations. And that will come to a climax when the saints participate with Christ in the final judgment. In 1 Corinthians 6:2 Paul writes, “[D]o you not know that the saints will judge the world?”

Now the Bible does not give much detail about this, but what it does do is assure us that the tables will be turned when Jesus returns. Now the world has power to persecute Christians. The time is coming when those who are now small and weak before the powerful world will share in Christ’s rule over the nations. The saints will be involved in judging the nations. We do not have to know the details to know that the tables will be turned when the Lord returns. If we share in Christ’s suffering in the here and now, we will share in his authority in the time to come. Those who persist in their rebellion against Christ will be judged and the saints will have a hand in that judgment.

The exalted Christ also promises the morning star to those who conquer through keeping Jesus' works to the end. "Verse 28 "And I will give him the morning star." This is a reaffirmation of the promise to rule with Christ. In Revelation 22:16, Jesus says, "I am the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star." The morning star is Christ as King and so the reference in our text is to sharing in Christ's rule over the nations.

All of this highlights the tremendous significance of continuing to serve Christ in the face of all kinds of temptations and challenges. The way that the exalted Christ speaks in this passage highlights the awesome issues that are at stake in the battle that is the Christian life. Patient endurance is necessary because the temptations to worldliness are real and powerful. The warning to those who are seduced by the Jezebels of this world are serious and solemn. Jesus says, "I am he who searches the mind and heart and I will give to each of you according to your works." We are not saved by works, but we are saved unto works and we will be judged by our works.

But this passage also shows how Jesus knows the works, love, faith, service and patient endurance of those who are faithful to him. These are not sinless lives, but lives covered by the righteousness of Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. We can be encouraged by the fruit in our lives even though it is mixed with sin. This passage is meant to encourage those who are engaged in the fight of faith. It's not about perfection. It's about being in the fight.

And we can be encouraged by what Jesus promises here to those who conquer. We will share in Jesus' reign. Whatever that means, it is good. It is sharing with Christ in the task of glorifying God. It is sharing with him in pursuing his goals and purposes. It will be satisfying. It will be meaningful. It will be God-honoring. We are encouraged to persist in the fight by the joy that is set before us.