

Reigniting the Flame: Worldliness **Revelation 2:18-29**

I. Introduction

So we are on week four of a seven-week series exploring the seven letters that begin the Bible book called Revelation. Each of these seven letters reveals what Christ commends and condemns as to living out our faith in Christian community. So these letters are very practical in helping us to understand what pleases God, and what provokes God's judgment in our own life.

The church in Pergamum that we explored last week, and the church in Thyatira that we'll explore today, were both rebuked for allowing sexual immorality, and compromise with the world's ungodly practices and values. Last week we focused on repentance of sexual immorality. This week we are going to explore the matter of worldliness.

Let us pray...

II. Scripture

Rev 2:18-29

18 "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. 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.

20 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.

21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 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. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

24 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): 25 Only hold on to what you have until I come.

26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations- 27'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. 28 I will also give him the morning star.

29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

III. Exploring the Letter to Thyatira

Thyatira was a small city full of merchants and artists. The woman Lydia, converted to Christ through the Apostle Paul, made and sold purple cloth here.

One commentary describes the situation in Thyatira like this... *“the local artisans produced a variety of merchandise, for they were bakers, painters, tanners, tailors, potters, and workers in wool, linen, and metal (chiefly copper); and there were slave dealers.”*⁵⁶ *Thyatira was an industrial center controlled by guilds, that is, trade unions. These guilds paid homage to the pagan gods Apollo and Artemis....”*

To a city who worshiped the Sun God Apollo, Christ is revealed as the only “*Son of God.*” And to a city that prided itself on its copper merchandise, Christ is presented as the one “*whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze....*”

Our commentary goes on to describe how hard it was to be a Christian in this city saying... *“Members of the guild were obligated to attend festivals in honor of these gods, to eat meals in their temples, and to indulge in sexual promiscuity. Noncompliance with these rules meant expulsion from the trade union, lack of employment, and poverty. Christians who refused to honor pagan gods, eat meat sacrificed to an idol, and engage in sexual immorality jeopardized their material necessities. They were regarded as outcasts of society.”*¹

It is to these Christians in Thyatira that faced with such pressures to compromise on their convictions that Christ declared... *“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.”*

The faithful Christ-followers in that wicked city were staying faithful to Christ, and Biblical morality, even though it was costing them their jobs, forcing them to live in poverty, and being ridiculed and mocked.

Not only were they remaining faithful, but Christ acknowledge that their faith just kept growing deeper, and their service to Christ just kept increasing. In contrast to the Ephesians Christians who were doing less then they did when they first saved, these believers were commended for doing more than they did at first.

And so the Christians in Thyatira serve as an inspiring example to us!

Sadly, this is not the whole story. Evidently, there were also some believers there who were compromising and caving in to the pressure to conform to their culture, and so them we read Christ’s rebuke...

⁵⁶ Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 325; Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 246 n. 10.

¹Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Vol. 20: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Book of Revelation*. Accompanying biblical text is author's translation. New Testament Commentary (136). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

20 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.

These Old Testament names and characters in these letter are meant to be symbolic, and not names of actual people in the churches. Just as Balaam represented sexual sin and worldly compromise in the church in Pergamum, so Jezebel represents the same in the church in Thyatira.

In the Old Testament, Jezebel was the wife of Israel's King Ahab. She seduced the people of Israel to worship the pagan god Baal and the goddess Asherah, which involved sexual immorality, and eating food dedicated to these idols. Evidently, there was a woman and her followers in the church at Thyatira that were likewise seducing the believers into sexual immorality, and worldly compromise.

Now there is grace revealed and an admonition given in this letter that applies to us...

Here's the grace and gospel in this passage... Despite the horrific nature of their sin, Christ still offered them forgiveness. Verse 21 reveals that Christ offered even this "Jezebel" group time to repent. But tragically, they refused. And so Christ declared that He was going to bring severe judgment upon this Jezebel and her followers.

Hear this truth well: God's grace is inexhaustible, but it is not endless. God offers us in Christ forgiveness of every possible sin. But there comes a time when Christ says, *"I have given you sufficient time to repent. But you have refused. Now I have to extend to you the severe mercy of my redemptive discipline in order to sanctify and save you."*

Sometimes this severe mercy even includes death. We have an example of this in 1 Corinthians where the Apostle Paul commands the church there to hand over an unrepentant Christian to Satan for his flesh to be destroyed in order that he might still be saved in the end.

And so please here this admonition well: If there is some sin in your life that Christ has been convicting you over, and calling you to repentance, it would be wise of you to respond now, before Christ must extend to you His severe mercy!

In verse 22, Christ was still holding out the invitation to repentance to the Christians in Thyatira who were being led astray. We don't know how they responded.

IV. Loving the World or Loving God

We do know this...Christ is still extending this invitation to repentance to you and me. Here is where the struggles of these dear saints who lived almost 2000 years ago have relevance for our lives today.

Throughout the ages, and for us today, the temptation is always prevalent to compromise full obedience to Christ in some area in order to be accepted by the world or to participate in its pleasures.

This is the heart of what is called worldliness. Worldliness is whenever we conform more to the standards, values, ethics, or morality of the world than to God's standards, values, ethics, and morality.

The Apostle John, who wrote Revelation, was also used by God to write these words found in **1 John 2:15-17...**

"15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but the one who does the will of God lives forever."

This should be a convicting and sobering passage! Loving the things of this world cancels out our love for Father God.

We must have a very clear, strong, and thoroughly Biblical understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Many American Christians fall for the seduction of Jezebel. They settle for a Christianity that is really nothing more than fire insurance to keep them out of eternal hell, but it has no or very little influence in how they live their life.

Many tend to think of our salvation as just a past event of having once accepted Christ. Having done so, they assume they are ensured of their future escape from God's wrath, and guaranteed of eternal life in heaven. This assumption is made regardless of how they live their lives, and despite have little participation in communal Christianity

This concept of salvation being just a one-time decision instead of a life-long discipleship is fairly recent in the history of Christianity. It arose mainly out of evangelistic tent meetings in the early history of America. Charles Finney, a tent-meeting evangelist, whose theology was heretical in many areas, really invented this "one-time" decision concept of salvation about 180 years ago.

This model evolved to the classical "altar call" inviting people to come forward, pray what became known as the "sinner's prayer," and then declared to be Christian. Evangelist like Billy Sunday and Bill Graham made this model the standard form of how people become a Christian.

But is it Biblical? Is salvation the result of a one-time decision? "No," is the short answer.

Salvation in the Bible is always presented as a process. The tense of the word group that we translate "salvation," which is the Greek word "sozo" is almost always in the tense that indicates an ongoing process. Whenever we read the word "saved" or "salvation" it is more accurate to read, we are in the process of "being saved."

Please hear this critique well: The “altar call” understanding of salvation has fostered generations of American Christians who think that salvation is received through a one-time decision that leaves ongoing transformation and obedience as optional.

So if Christ, the apostles, and the Church did not do altar calls for 1,820 years, until Finney showed up, what did Christ say about becoming a Christ-follower.

Let’s read some of Christ’s own words on the matter...

John 12:23-26

23 Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

25 The one who loves his or her life will lose it, while the one who hates his or her life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Matt 16:24-28

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

26 What good will it be for a person if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his or her soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his or her soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he or she has done.

What does it mean to be a Christian, a “little Christ” which is what the word means, a Christ-follower?

Being a Christian is being a life-long disciple, not making a one time decision!

It means living such a counter-cultural life that you will not fit in with the world. Indeed, as Christ declared, the mark of being a disciple is that the world hates you just as it hated Christ!

Here this truth well: One cannot claim to be a Christian and live in willful, unrepentant sin, or live in separation from Christian community.

Salvation is not praying a sinner’s prayer, and then living life like a sinner!

Salvation is a wholehearted surrender to Christ as Savior and Lord,
and a radical commitment to live in obedience
to the righteous commands of Christ
with the people of God
and in the power of the Holy Spirit!

V. Measuring Our Worldliness

Christ makes it unmistakably clear, you cannot love the things of this world and love God at the same time because one love cancels out the other. As Christ also declared, you cannot serve two masters, worldly pleasure and kingdom living, for you will love the one and hate the other.

So how do we measure our degree of worldliness?

Rom 12:1-2 answers that question...

"12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your spiritual act of worship.

2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will."

We measure our degree of worldliness by evaluating each of our beliefs, values, standards, and actions against the Word of God!

The Judeo-Christian Bible alone is God's sole divinely inspired revelation to humanity.

The Bible alone is the absolute authority over what life, belief, and practice God deems true and holy.

The Bible isn't a menu that you can pick which truth you like which truth you'll deny!

God's truth is truth whether one believes it or not. Humans don't get to decide what behaviors are sinful! God does!

And all of us will be held accountable for our beliefs and actions come final judgment by God according to God's Word, not our customized version of God's Word.

So the wise course of action is to judge ourselves according to God's Word now!

VI. Overcoming Our Worldliness

This is what it means to live a life of faith. Just as salvation is not a one-time decision but a life of fully committed discipleship...so faith is not a mental belief in truth, but the practice of truth.

Faith in practice is how we overcome the world. Listen to **1 Jn 5:3-4...**

"This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith."

Loving the things of this world cancels out our love for Father God. Of course, it works in reverse too. This is the cure for worldliness...

Love for the Father cancels out our love for the sinful pleasures and offerings of this current world.

Faith is the power to overcome the world, to deny its offerings of pleasure, power, and success. But Hope is the sustaining motivation to do so.

Here is a key truth in overcoming worldliness: We are created in the image of God, and designed to be beings of amazing glory, power, and significance. It is in our DNA to want to be beings of beauty, glory, power, and worth. Those desires are not the source of our sin. It is the demand and pursuit that we experience the fullness of those things now, instead of in God's soon coming and eternal kingdom that is the source of our sin and worldliness.

There are three godly ways to deal with our desires that we must do at the same time...

First of all, we must acknowledge that we have deep longings for power, success, significance, and pleasure, we were created for such.

Then we must accept the truth that because of our fallenness, and the fallenness of our present world, we must delay the full gratification of those longings until God's eternal kingdom.

Then thirdly, we must celebrate and be content with whatever appetizers of success, pleasure, and significance that God does allow us to enjoy now.

Col 3:1-6 speaks to this truth in declaring...

"3:1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming."

VII. The Rewards of Overcoming Worldliness

We've been discovering that in each of these seven letters from Revelation we are exploring in this series, that there is a promise given to those who do overcome this world in Christ. I've also pointed out how each of the promises directed related to the challenges faced by that church.

To the Christians in Thyatira, who were being tempted with worldliness, and so to you and I who also are tempted with worldliness, Christ offers us this incomprehensible promise...

"26 To those who overcome and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations-

27 They will rule them with an iron scepter; and will dash them to pieces like pottery'-just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give them the morning star."

The “morning star” has many references. The Romans worshiped Venus, which was called the “morning star.” And so this would have been understood by the original hearers of this letter as the granting of great authority and power.

It also could possibly refer to Satan who was originally named “Lucifer,” which means, “Morning Star.” Lucifer was assigned as the ruling archangel over Earth. He lost that position when he rebelled against God. His authority will now be given to the children of God who overcome this world.

Morning Star is also a name given to Christ, indicating that our authority over the nations will always be a delegated authority with Christ.

This then is the purifying hope that empowers us to overcome worldliness...

The reward for denying ungodly or excessive worldly pleasure, power, and success now is that you will get to rule the world for eternity!