

What Christ Expects of His Church

5. The Letter to Thyatira: Holiness

Revelation 2:18-29

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The challenge before us in this series of sermons based on the mysterious and apocalyptic letters to the seven churches of Asia is whether we can discern any guidance or direction that will help us to know what Christ expects of his church in the first or twenty-first centuries. To be sure, there is no shortage of expectations for the church from inside or outside her walls, but in the final analysis, only what Jesus Christ expects of those who follow him and bear his name ultimately matters. Thus far we have learned, or at least I have proposed, that followers of Jesus are expected first of all to love fervently (Ephesus), to suffer faithfully (Smyrna) if called upon to do so, to be people committed to the truth as they are given to understand it (Perganum), and today I will suggest that based on the letter to the church of Thyatira Jesus further expects holiness of his followers. Let us listen now for the word of the God. (Read Revelation 2:18-29)

Some Bible commentators suggest that this fourth letter to the church of Thyatira, the longest of all the seven letters, is addressed to perhaps the least important of all the seven cities. It was essentially a center for trade and commerce and was known for its numerous trade guilds, but still it was considered less important than the other cities. Lydia, the dealer in purple garments, called it home. (Acts 16:14) You may not be too sure of this city's importance but you are sure that you listened carefully as I read the morning lesson, some of you even followed along, and you're pretty sure that you never heard or saw the first mention of holiness, nor did you see holy as a descriptor of Christians in Thyatira.

What is more, you hope I may be wrong or misguided about this interpretation because one thing you are very certain about is that your own name and the mention of holiness seldom occur in the same sentence. And to be quite frank about it, you are not at all sure that holiness is something to which you aspire. I can understand that. The word *holy* has been given a bad rap in recent times. Many people hear the word holy applied to a person and they immediately think "holier-than-thou." They think sanctimonious, self-righteous and perhaps even hypocritical. After all, what sinner (and that pretty much includes any person still breathing!) can claim to be holy? Right? That's what you're thinking.

Well, let me tell you what holy really means, why holiness seems to be at issue in Thyatira, why it is important and why Christ expects it of those who follow him.

The primary meaning of the word holy (hagios) when applied to persons means those who are set apart for God, those who are distinctive from others because of their relationship to God. They are not self-righteous or judgmental but are simply different and they stand out from others because of a connection to God. In short, they are distinct because their obedience to and their love for God causes them to march to the beat of a different drum. In the New Testament the “holy ones” in Greek is often rendered in English as “the saints.” And this does not mean some extraordinary super Christian who one day will be rendered in stained glass, but rather a child of God and a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ who recognizes that he or she has been called by God into a covenant relationship and has been set apart as a member of God’s family to serve him and others.

And so, if you are a Christian then Christ expects you to be one of his saints, one of his “holy ones.” I am reminded of the words of Peter, also addressed to a persecuted church in which he says: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The Greek expression for holy nation here is *ethnos hagion*, meaning a people set apart. And the phrase “God’s own people” in the Greek literally means “a people for God’s possession.” The old King James Version of the Bible translated this as “*A peculiar people.*” You may always have known that Christians were peculiar, but what makes us peculiar is that God possesses us and has set us apart for his service.

Well, you say, even if that is what holiness means, is it really that important? Since we do not speak of holiness often in the church could it be just a minor virtue or something of marginal importance? Absolutely not! Paul tells the Ephesians (1:4): “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” The calling to holiness is one of the major intentions behind God’s election of his people. It is one of the primary purposes behind Christ’s sacrificial death. Paul writes to Titus saying: “He (Jesus) gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” (Titus 2:14)

Or again, in *1st Thessalonians 4* we read: “Finally, dear brothers and sisters, we urge you in the name of the Lord Jesus to live in a way that pleases God as we have taught you. God’s will is for you to be holy so stay away from all sexual sin. Then each of you will control his own body and live in holiness and honor --- not in lustful passion like the pagans who do not know God and his ways. God has called us to live holy lives, not impure lives. Therefore, anyone who refuses to live by these rules is not disobeying human teaching but is rejecting God, who gives his holy spirit to you.” (1 Thessalonians 4:1, 3-5, 7-8 NLT)

Well, you are thinking, I understand what holiness means now (set apart for God’s service) and I see its importance to God, but I still don’t see how holiness is the issue in the letter to Thyatira. So, let’s look at this letter together.

As the letter opens the risen Christ, as has been his custom in these letters, says that he knows the church very well and he lavishes praise upon this congregation. He knows of their love and their faith and their service --- even their patient endurance in times of trial. What is more, it is a church that is moving in the right direction because their more recent works are greater than their first works. So, this seems to be a thriving, vital, active congregation. They're just the opposite of the Ephesian church whose love was waning. Not so in Thyatira. This church seems to be growing in faith and service. So, while Ephesus is moving downward, Thyatira is forging ahead. They seem to be a church that is courageous, patient, and persevering.

And yet, there seems to be trouble in paradise. Christ has an issue with or a complaint against this church. It seems they tolerate a woman described as Jezebel who considers herself a prophet and is beguiling Christ's servants and seducing them to do things that make them less distinctive as God's people and yes, less holy as God's people. Because of Jezebel's teaching, the church might fit in better with the surrounding culture, but in so doing they are rejecting the holiness and the distinctiveness to which they are called in Christ. In all the virtues listed for the church of Thyatira, holiness is strangely absent, which is rather unusual given its importance to God and to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what I am saying is that while holiness seems to be an indispensable attribute of the people of God, this trait seems clearly to be under threat in Thyatira and apparently the threat is coming from within the church. Some churches, like Pergamum, are threatened by forces outside their walls, but this threat in Thyatira is internal. The most serious challenges to the people of God have always been internal and that is why heresy is often a greater danger than paganism, and erroneous belief more problematic than disbelief.

Now who is this seductress Jezebel and what is the nature of her deception? Surely Jezebel is not the actual name of this person but in good symbolic and apocalyptic fashion she is given this name to suggest something of her character. John does this throughout the book of Revelation and so Balaam, Jezebel, Babylon, and Jerusalem are applied to other persons and places. Apparently, the Jezebel of Thyatira, like her namesake, was seducing God's people by trying to get them to blend in with the surrounding culture rather than stand apart from it. She was encouraging God's children to embrace a syncretistic religion. Apparently, she was encouraging them to pay no attention to food prohibitions or sexual prohibitions and simply blend in with society.

We know the original Jezebel, that murderous and wicked queen of Israel who was the wife of King Ahab, had tried to introduce Baal worship into Israel. She was a foreigner who brought her own gods and priests and false prophets with her into Israel where she intended them to coexist with Yahweh and his prophets. She promoted idolatry and witchcraft within the realm and encouraged the immoral sexual practices that had been a part of her own religion back in her native land of Sidon, where her father had been a priest of Astarte, one of the fertility gods of the Near East. Apparently, he murdered his way all the way to the throne of

Sidon. Sacred prostitution took place at the temples of Astarte and Jezebel sought to introduce this practice into Israel alongside the practice of Yahwism. But Elijah and Elisha were used by the Lord to confront and defeat this evil scheme and its promoters.

At any rate, the Jezebel of Thyatira was like her namesake in that she sought to corrupt God's people who were following Christ. She, too, encouraged syncretism and tolerance of practices which were clearly an affront to God and would make the Christians who followed them not only less distinctive, less holy, but also less likely to influence the corrupt society in which they were living. If this new Jezebel were to succeed, then the church in Thyrtira would have been brought down to the culture's level instead of lifting the culture up to its level. Sometimes, as we all know, the world enters the church much more effectively than the church enters the world. And so, it is that we lose our distinctiveness, yes, our holiness.

We're not really sure of the substance of this woman's teaching, but clearly it is a threat and it is being tolerated unnecessarily. As was the case of Pergamum with the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans, the Jezebel of Thyatira is accepting if not encouraging sexual immorality (Fornication in particular) and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. (Now there is much more that I have to say about these recurring threats of sexual immorality and the eating of food offered to idols, but I will deal with that at length in a coming sermon.)

The letter to Thyatira says that Jezebel will be given time to repent, which reveals God's mercy, but it also insists that failing to do so she and those that have become her followers, will be punished severely, revealing also the justice of God which tempers God's mercy.

The Jesus who is speaking in these letters is the same Jesus whom we claim to follow in the church today. He knows every church and every follower today as well as he did twenty centuries ago. Nothing is hidden from God's view and he knows very well if we are trying to honor or conceal our calling to be his distinctive, his holy people. Verse 23 says that all the churches should know that Christ searches the minds and hearts of his people and will judge and reward them accordingly. (A brief aside here: the English Bible usually say that Jesus searches the mind and heart, but literally in the Greek it says the kidneys (*Nepthroi*) and heart (*Kardia*) because the kidneys were believed to be the seat of the emotions, the heart was viewed as the seat of the intellect.) Today, however, we think of the heart as the seat of the emotions and the mind the intellect. But if you ever hear an evangelist say, "With every eye closed and every head bowed, you can invite Jesus to come into your kidneys..." well, you will have found a true Biblical literalist there!

But the point here is that Jesus knows us still. He knows how we think and what we love and if we are to be his distinctive and holy people we must endeavor to think as he thinks and to love as he loves, to do the works that he does.

The letter closes, as do the others, with promises to those who are faithful, to those who endure, who overcome, who persistently "hold fast" to Christ's word and works. The

promises here are two-fold, the first being that those who persevere and remain true to God will be allowed to share in Christ's authority over the nations, the same authority he was given by his father (Psalm 2:89). I take this to mean that in eternity those who have proven themselves loyal and committed will be given the privilege of responsibility over others. Because they have proven themselves trustworthy in this life, they will be given greater privileges and responsibilities in the life to come. We do know, don't we, that all people will be judged according to their works (Romans vs 2; 22-23), including the children of God and the disciples of Christ. We may be saved on the basis of our faith, but we will be judged also according to our works.

And the second promise to the one who conquers is that he or she will be given the morning star, a lovely and compelling phrase, is it not? Some suggest that this refers to victory over Lucifer, the fallen angel who, according to Isaiah 14:12 and following, is referred to as the "Day Star." The "Sun of Dawn" who will be cut down and cast out. Interpreted this way, the promise of the morning star means that the faithful will ultimately be victorious over the Satanic forces of evil.

Yet another interpretation relates the promises to Daniel 12:3 and suggests that the faithful will share in the glory and the brightness of those who have not only been righteous but have encouraged others to follow in the way of righteousness.

But there is a third interpretation that really speaks to me. Later in the book of Revelation John will refer to Jesus himself as the "bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16.) So perhaps John is simply telling the Christians in Thyatira and the Christians here in Greensboro that those who are willing to be distinctive and strive to be holy in their service to God will be given the Christ himself as our sacred eternal companion.

Most of you know that the church from which I retired in 2015 after eighteen years as their pastor was the First (Scots) Presbyterian Church of Charleston, South Carolina. We loved that church and that small city which still remains our home. Many of you are fond of visiting there and have told me so. Are you familiar with its nickname? If Chicago is "*The Windy City*," Charlotte, "*The Queen City*," and New Orleans, "*The Crescent City*," Charleston's moniker is "*The Holy City*." It is so dubbed, they say, because of the many churches and church spires gracing the peninsula. But just having a number of churches present, despite the beauty of their buildings, doesn't really mean that in truth the city is holy. No, it could only claim and live up to that high calling if those congregants in those churches are willing not out of pride or self-righteousness to stand out from society and be distinctive and different because of their love and allegiance and obedience to Jesus Christ.

And what about you? What about me? What about us here at First Presbyterian Church? Are we willing to be holy, set apart and distinctive as followers of God in Christ? Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Amen.