



The Thyatirean church that was corrupted by sin

2nd February 2025



4th Sunday after Epiphany

Main Idea:

Jesus has warned us about tolerating sin. He's warned us about compromising with sin. Now, while writing to the church at Thyatira, Jesus warns us about what happens when we allow sin to corrupt us.

Sin is always insidious. What is interesting about the church at Thyatira is while they were very loving and patient, abounding in good works, their love was not grounded in truth. When love is not mixed with truth it loses its power and quickly degenerates into enablement and corruption. Let us heed Jesus' warning and repent from any area of our life that has been corrupted by sin.

Have you had seasons when your life just felt like an utter mess? When nothing seems to be working, and all your best laid out plans just seem to be unravelling and spiralling out of control?

Those of us who work in the church office listen to what's happening in the lives of those who seek emergency relief, and our hearts break with what we hear. Sudden loss of job, homelessness, domestic violence, sickness and medical procedures that never seem to end ... while life is messy for all of us – it is certainly messier for some, than others.

Now, we should all be used to being around messy people, because that's what the church is. We're all a bit messy. While some people can trick you for a season, before long the mask falls away and you realise, they're just as messy as the rest of us.

Someone once said, "to know a person is to know their mess."

There is a reason God places his children in church families. He desires our growth. And He knows that growth doesn't happen unless we love each other genuinely enough to speak the truth to each other in the midst of our shared messiness.

However, if we try to love people without speaking the truth, well ... we'll just end up behaving like a bad taxi driver. Whoa! That's an illustration you didn't see coming! What do I mean?

Let's imagine we're walking beside a person because their life is going through a particularly messy season. It's like we've welcomed them into our taxi car. However, if we love them without speaking the truth, we'll end up giving all our energy to ensure their comfort; ensuring the temperature in the car is just right; ensuring their favourite music is playing; remembering to offer jellies as they ride along.

However, if we as the driver, don't have any navigation skills or knowledge of the city we're driving in, we could spend hours driving around and eventually drop our passenger off kilometres from where they actually need to go!

This is what happens when we are kind, polite, caring, and compassionate, when a person is struggling, but fail to bring the truth of God and how the gospel applies to their life.

And that is the dangerous trap that the congregation at Thyatira fell into.

Now, let's start with a little bit of background about the city of Thyatira. Thyatira was the headquarters for many ancient guilds: the potters, tanners, weavers, robe makers and dyers guilds. It was actually the centre of the dyeing industry. Even with this thriving hub of industry, Thyatira was actually the smallest city Jesus wrote to. What is ironic however, is that although it was one of the most insignificant Jesus had the most to say to them.

First let's notice how Jesus identified Himself. He says He is *"the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass."* (v18) Now, while we may think the Thyatireans would be pleased to receive a letter from one with such a title, Jesus is reminding them of His authoritative place in the Trinity, and His ability to see through all their pretences.

Today we'd probably use the expression, "they seem to be able to see right through me, right into my soul."

Now, while that's quite an unsettling thought, because of Jesus' nature, His penetrating gaze is ultimately designed to heal, not condemn.

Point 1 | The church in Thyatira had many good qualities: loving service and patient works, yet there was an aspect of church life that greatly grieved Jesus' heart.

So, what intimate detail does Jesus know about this church?

"I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first." (v19) So, this fellowship had hard workers who were known for their actions, not just their beliefs. They were also motivated by their faith in Christ, which propelled their serving of others. They served with great patience and related with people with great love. In fact, they are the only church that Jesus commended for having love. But, as we'll soon see, this love also proved to be their downfall. The last phrase regarding their works, means they were growing in their faith, not just resting in something God had done for them in the past.

As I consider our church today, I wonder if the same commendation could be said of us: We have great deeds, love, faith, service and we persevere well. We are doing more now than ever. Someone may read Jesus' words up until this point and stop there and think, "Ok, wow, that church should get a straight A on Jesus' test of church healthiness!

Point 2 | The Thyatirean congregation had allowed the evil, adulterous spirit of Jezebel to penetrate their fellowship, leading them towards ungodly behaviour and spirit idolatry towards God.

But sadly, there is a criticism, and it is a scathing rebuke by Jesus that basically flunks this church.

"Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and

eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent."

Wow, that's heavy. Sadly, the church in Thyatira had (if you can believe this!) too much love. (That is actually an incorrect statement, and I'll clarify what I mean in a moment!) Thyatira was strong in love but weak in guarding God's truth. They weren't willing to disagree with anyone when God's truth was being distorted. One commentator wrote:

"It's common for churches to be polarized in one of these two extremes. Either they will have full heads and empty hearts, or full hearts and empty minds. Either polarization is deadly. God demands both love and sound doctrine" (see 1 Timothy 1:3-5).

Point 3 | Real love is not true love if it is not prepared to face or confront the truth. We are called to 'speak the truth in love', knowing that only God's truth will set people free of their messes.

We can think of love and truth as like table salt. Table salt is actually a mixture of two elements: sodium and chloride. By themselves, both elements are poisonous. Sodium is an alkali metal which can be explosive if added to water, and chlorine, by itself, is a highly poisonous gas. If you ingest either sodium or chloride alone, you will die. But if you put them together properly, they become sodium chloride: common table salt.

So too, God's truth and love must be found together. One without the other can lead to a dangerous imbalance. But combined they provide flavour and health to the body of Christ. However, it is not always easy to show love and hold onto truth at the same time. Have you ever known someone who seems to 'love a little too much'? Or we might say, 'they are too kind for their own good'. People like that can get drawn into other people's messes, because they forget that even passionate love must have boundaries.

Real love is not true love if it is not prepared to face or confront the truth.

If we truly love someone, we're not going to withhold the truth from them. To do so will only lead to their destruction. In fact, when we withhold the truth from a person, it actually means we are not truly loving them. Because, as Paul taught, we are to "speak the truth in love, so we may grow up into Him in all things" (Ephesians 4:15).

But what did Jesus mean when He told them they tolerated Jezebel? He is probably not referring to a specific person named Jezebel. Rather, Jezebel represents the wicked woman who King Ahab married. God's word tells us that King Ahab was basically the most evil, wicked and demonic king that ever reigned in Israel. (1 Kings 16:33) Early in his reign, he married a Sidonian woman named Jezebel (1 Kings 18:4). One of her first actions was to kill all the prophets – and so was also very successful in turning Ahab to serve and worship Baal, the false god that was constantly a thorn to Israel. Jezebel also led God's people to commit sexual immorality and to offer their food to idols.

Back to Jesus letter to the Thyatireans, Jesus said that the same Jezebel-type spirit was causing them to commit sexual immorality and seducing people to do the same. Now we may say to ourselves, "Well I don't struggle with that, so I'm all good!" But before we let us ourselves off the hook, we must remember that Scripture regards 'idolatry' as the same thing as 'spiritual adultery'.

So, the Jezebel spirit [if I can call it that], represents things in our life that lead to idolatry—to worshipping or devoting ourselves to things instead of the true God. Jesus says He had graciously given her time to repent, just like God had given Ahab time and he actually did repent. However, this evil Jezebel spirit active in Thyatira, didn't change her ways, so He was about to cast her, meaning those under her control, onto a sickbed.

Notice that He says that people who commit adultery with her will also face consequences. They must, Jesus said, 'Repent.' And if they don't, they would suffer intensely and eventually die. (v22-23) This is serious stuff! Jesus reminds us that He has eyes that penetrate deep within our soul, revealing our true motives, and will reward or punish those according to their behaviour (v23).

So, although Thyatira would get an A+ on a lot of areas, there was one area that made them really flunk out. This happens very easily in churches.

Application | We are exhorted to hold fast to God's truth. We do this by living holy, godly lives, acknowledging the seriousness of sin, and being prepared to confront sin by standing up for God's truth.

It may start with a desire to fit in with the culture. However, in the process the church loses its distinctiveness. This isn't talking about the way we worship, it is referring to the way we live in lives before the world. We are called God's holy people. If we blend in so well into the world, so there is no obvious difference, we've lost the power of what we confess to believe.

Next, the more a church tolerates sin, the more it fails to rightly define the seriousness of sin. When we take steps to make the Gospel less offensive, we are failing to acknowledge the seriousness of sin and its power to separate us from God.

Finally, when we become tolerant of sin we fail to take a stand for truth. Jesus regards God's truth as enormously important and tremendously precious. I could site so many verses about how we should respond when someone tries to steer us away from God's truth. One example is what Paul said to his young protégé Timothy,

"Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith" (1 Timothy 6:20-21, also see 4:7, Titus 1:10-13, 3:9).

When we get into a discussion about what we believe, how tempting it is to remain silent rather than standing up for what we believe? Martin Luther King Jr. said: "There comes a time when silence is betrayal...Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

The truth of God and the message of the Gospel are the only things that can provide true hope, peace, joy, and transformation in the midst of our messes. To act lovingly toward someone but withhold what they desperately need isn't real love. We cannot build one another up through niceness or well wishes. We must love one another enough to courageously and wisely speak the truth.

Finally, Jesus says words to the effect of, 'Whatever you already have, just hang onto it; I won't lay some big heavy command on you.' Then comes the promise,

"To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— ... —just as I have received authority from my Father.

In Thyatira there was a big pottery guild, and Jesus is saying He will give us authority, like He was given from the Father to rule over the nations. We don't need to be afraid that we are some weak minority that is on the losing team. We have been given authority, and truth will win in the end!

My prayer for our church is that we will stand for truth, keep His word to the end and be a church that is known for speaking the truth in love.

Closing prayer:

Heavenly Father, We are so aware that it is easy to love people yet fail to share with them the ultimate truth of what will set them truly free. Forgive us for those times in which we have failed to share the truth of the Gospel. Forgive us when we drew back due to fear of being ostracized or

embarrassed. Give to us the courage to speak of our faith openly and confidently, especially with those with whom we are coming along side to help or care for in some way. I heartily make a commitment to speak your truth in love from this moment forward. This I will do through the Spirit's empowerment. **Amen.**

Going deeper into what Jesus expects of his church ...



Look out for Week 5 of the "Journey through Christ's Letters to His Church" devotional:

This week we look closely at Jesus letter to the church at Thyatira.

1. A failure to repent of sin can bring discipline from God. It is therefore wise to periodically examine yourself. Reflect for a few moments and consider whether there might be any sin in your life and experience the freeing power of repentance.
2. Does false doctrine bother you? Do you ever feel tempted to turn a blind eye toward false doctrine in order to avoid conflict with others?
3. Compromise is a good thing in some contexts but can be very dangerous in other contexts. Are you allowing compromise to enter your walk with the Lord? Is the Spirit of God prompting you to repent of the sin of compromise?
4. Is there an area in your life—which seems maybe small or insignificant—perhaps it is doctrinal or practical, or on the border of sinful—and you aren't paying attention to it? Are you beginning to compromise your beliefs or your behaviour