

The Marginalized Church
Revelation 2:18-29
11/9/2014

Being on the fringe is not usually much fun. It is, in fact, quite stressful. There is a feeling of insecurity. There is the fear of being kicked out of the “in” group altogether. There is the fear of ridicule. Sometimes, we fear greater things than ridicule, like bodily harm. Or, we could fear for our job security. I have talked with quite a few people in our church who are right in that place. They are doing what is right, and they are having to pay a price for doing that. The question arises, “Is it worth it?” Even if we haven't dealt with this problem in the workplace, most of us will at some point or another. The passage we are looking at today says that doing the right thing is always worth it, even if appearances seem to suggest otherwise. The reason it is worth it is that Jesus Christ sees it all, searches mind and heart, and will overturn the world's rejection by rejecting the world of sin in the final judgment.

The situation in Thyatira is very closely related to the situation in Pergamum, and it is the opposite of the situation in Ephesus. Pergamum, if you recall, was dealing with people who were trying to lead God's people astray into serving idols, eating food sacrificed to idols, and sexual immorality. This is called the teaching of Balaam, and the Nicolaitans. The church there held fast, and yet it was wavering. Here in Thyatira, the temptations were similar, although the exact situation was slightly different, and it is in this difference that we will find some excellent instruction.

Thyatira was a city that had many trade guilds. You could not buy, sell, or manufacture just about anything unless you belonged to one of these guilds. The most important of these guilds were the fabric guilds, and the metalworking guilds. The guilds were very, very powerful, and they were very, very corrupt. Christians who were members of these guilds were put in a very precarious position. If they offended the non-Christian leaders of the guild, they could be kicked out, and then they would lose their livelihood. The problem was the festivals that the guilds would have every now and then to celebrate the gods of the guild. These parties were wild, with alcohol, idolatry (especially food sacrificed to idols!), and sex being the substance of the parties. So, you see, the temptation was double in power what it would be almost anywhere else: not only was there the lure of forbidden fruits, but also there was the threat of being marginalized, or kicked out of the guild, if the Christians did not engage in these heathen practices.

The situation in Thyatira was exactly the opposite of the situation in Ephesus. In Ephesus, the church loved truth, and they loved the purity of the church, but they had forgotten their first love to God and to one another. In other

words, they loved truth, but not people. In Thyatira, the situation was exactly the opposite. In Thyatira, the Christians loved people, and they were very good at serving people. In fact, they were getting better and better at it. Jesus says that their last works were better than their first works, a description that is in stark contrast with Ephesus, where they Christians there had lost their first love, and were commanded to do the first works.

But in Thyatira, the love of people carried a danger along with it: the fear of people. When the love of people turns into the fear of people, then truth goes out the window. What Jesus is, in effect, saying here is this: "I love your love, but I hate your tolerance." Tolerance can, of course, mean something good, but it could also mean something bad. When tolerance is good, it means that we can get along with people who disagree with us without getting all bent out of shape. Tolerance is bad when it is used as a hammer to make everyone be exactly the same, and to deny that there can be only true religion in Christianity.

The nature of the temptations that Thyatira faced can be very similar in today's world, can't they? Your boss asks you to do something that is illegal, and tells you that your job is at stake if you do not do it. Or maybe your company has a party, and some of the same temptations are present at it that were present in first-century Thyatira. And if you do not participate, you feel like you will be labeled, and we know that everyone hates to be labeled.

The description of Jesus Christ here, like all the other letters, is taken from chapter 1, and is particularly suited to the context of the local church. Jesus has eyes like a flame of fire, which means that they can see everything, and can burn straight through all smokescreens that people try to put in the way. Jesus' feet are like burnished bronze. Thyatira was famous for its metal-working guild. They had a patented method of producing bronze that was the envy of the ancient world. Jesus is saying here that the wisdom of the metalworkers in Thyatira is only a shadow of the wisdom that He possesses. So Jesus can see right through all the false teaching that is plaguing Thyatira's church, and He is able to give wisdom to those who ask of Him.

We have already seen the things for which Jesus extends encouragement, and they are real and undoubtedly good things. It is right and good to serve and love other people. It is especially good to do those things in an increasing way, which shows that in some ways the church in Thyatira was attaining some maturity in its view of service. These are real acts of service that God approves. As with all of the other churches that receive both encouragement and warning, we must not allow the commendation to be swallowed up with the censure, nor must we allow the warning to be lost amid the praise. The good things are quite good, and the bad things are quite bad! There is a practical lesson for us right there. Many of us only look on the bright side, and are unable to see problems. If we are like that, then we need to pray for wisdom so that we are not hoodwinked by evil

when it comes along. Then there are people who only find fault with other people. They are often good at detecting error, but not so good at encouragement. Every Christian in this world, and every church in this world has good things and bad things. We must not close our eyes to the problems, and we must not condemn a whole church because of one thing they do badly. Similarly, we must not be blind to people's faults, and yet we must also not forget to be encouraging.

The person or people who were attempting to lead Thyatira astray John calls Jezebel. Jezebel, of course, was Ahab's wife as described in 1 Kings 18-22. Probably John is using the symbol of Jezebel to get across how destructive this false teaching was for the church at Thyatira. There is a strong emphasis here in Revelation on the fact that she is a false prophetess and that her teaching is false teaching. Jesus' warning is significant: all her children (those who follow her teaching) Jesus will put to death, as it says in verse 23. This is how much Jesus hates false teaching!

The nature of the false teaching was fairly clear: it was calling good evil and evil good. This is what Satanic deception always does. Verse 20 uses the word "seduce," which would actually be better translated "deceive." Probably this prophetess was telling the church members that they could do what the guild told them to do, as long as they knew in their heart of hearts that the idols did not really exist. She was the forerunner of all those who claim that our outward actions do not really matter as long as our hearts are in the right place. Friends, God cares about our hearts, certainly. However, He also cares about our actions! Is it not absurd to suppose that God would only care about the anger or lust in our hearts, and not care about the actual murder or adultery we might commit? He cares about both!

Apparently, this false teaching had been going on for some time, since Jesus says in verse 21 that He had given her time to repent. She had refused to repent. This means that she had been confronted with her sin, but she steadfastly refused to repent and turn away from that sin. There is another clue about how long this had been going on in verse 24, where Jesus talks about people not learning "the deep things of Satan." Obviously one cannot go deep unless one has time to do so. Jesus confronts the church not only with the sin, but with how long they have been engaging in that sin.

How do we react when our sin is brought in front of our faces? We can tell a lot about ourselves at that moment. As one author puts it, "Does it make you angry? Or does it make you humble, contrite, and more grateful that Jesus died to pay the penalty for sin? Does it make you more zealous to turn away from sin in the future? Or does it make you feel like you need to be more careful not to be caught in the future?" Let us be crystal clear here: those who refuse to repent are identifying themselves as Jezebel's children, and Jesus has said that He will strike those children dead.

However, there is a glorious answer to the problem. Jesus is the one who enables us to repent. Why else would He have told the church there about the problem? The very fact that such a letter was written to Thyatira is reason for great hope, not only for us, but also for all those we know who do not know Jesus. Jesus' eyes (which are like a flame of fire) can pierce through all our smokescreens and reveal us to ourselves. When that happens, and we see the innermost corners of our hearts and are disgusted by what we find, then Jesus tells us to look out and away from our own hearts, and to turn our eyes upon Jesus, and look in His wonderful face. For the time of repentance and salvation is now. The call is for us to reject Jezebel. What Jesus promises is that the rejection of Jezebel means that we gain Christ. The promises at the end are again two-fold.

The first promise has to do with ruling the world with a rod of iron. Thyatira thought that it could rule the world through its bronze. But Christ, and through Christ, His followers, will one day rule the whole world with a rod of iron, which is stronger than bronze. What Thyatira thought was such a tough metal will only really be an earthen pot broken in pieces, as verse 27 says. Christ rules, and he will set us up as rulers under Him.

The second promise is that Christ will give the one who overcomes the morning star. The morning star is the last star to disappear in the morning. In Revelation, it is mentioned in only one other place, which is Revelation 22:16, and there we learn what the morning star is: "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." So when Jesus promises the morning star to the one who overcomes, He is promising to give Himself to that person. Rejecting Jezebel means gaining Christ. As Jim Elliot would say, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."

So, do not worry about being in the "in" crowd. For one day, the "in" crowd will be defined as all those the world wanted to shun. We serve a God of reversals. God will reverse the "in" crowd to be those condemned to outer darkness. And those who were rejected by the world will become the cornerstones. As it happened with Jesus Christ, so it will happen with His followers. Resistance is not futile, for the true Christian will never be assimilated.