

THYATIRA: BE HOLY

SERIES: JESUS: LORD OF HIS CHURCH

by Ron Ritchie

William Law was an Anglican priest who lived in England from 1686 to 1761. He loved to lead Christians into a closer relationship with God. In his book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1) he wrote: "Devotion signifies a life given or devoted to God. The devout, therefore, are people who do not live their own will, or in the way and spirit of the world, but only to the will of God. Such people consider God in everything, serve God in everything, and make every aspect of their lives holy by doing everything in the name of God and in a way that conforms to God's glory."

Holiness is the high calling of God for his bride, the church, in every generation. The church in Thyatira was no exception, but it had compromised that high calling.

The book of Revelation is the unveiling of our fully glorified Lord Jesus in all his majesty, power, authority, righteousness, and love. He appeared to John, the last living apostle, during his Roman imprisonment on the island of Patmos (95 AD). John had been placed there by the authorities because of his witness for his Lord in the port city of Ephesus, Turkey. At that appearance, our Lord commissioned John to write seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, respectively, as well as the remainder of the revelation. In those seven letters Jesus gave words of encouragement, correction, exhortation, and promise, which were beneficial in that day and which continue to be beneficial to the churches today. He encouraged the church of Ephesus to guard their love for Jesus, the church of Smyrna to remain faithful in the midst of suffering, and the church of Pergamum to remain faithful to the truth in the midst of temptation. Then Jesus moved on to...

The church in Thyatira: a call to holiness

Revelation 2:18:

"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."

The city of Thyatira lay some forty miles southeast of Pergamum on the postal route between Ephesus and Laodicea. The Romans took possession of the city in 133 BC, and under the "Roman peace" the city began to grow economically. Trade guilds were set up for workers in the wool, linen, leather, bronze, pottery, baking, dying, and slave trades. Paul's first convert in the northern city of Philippi, Greece was a woman named Lydia of Thyatira, who sold purple cloth produced in her hometown. Commercial prosperity attracted many Jewish businessmen and their families, and in time they established a series of local synagogues.

There is no recorded history of the beginning of the church of Thyatira, but it appears that they had little if any governmental or religious pressure against them. However, there is some evidence that the local trade guilds posed a problem for the Christians. These trade guilds challenged the Christians' consciences because membership involved a demanding social life, pagan rituals, and periodic feasts at which the members ate meat offered to idols and participated in sexual orgies. At the same time, the Christians feared that if they left the guilds it might cripple their social and business network. Then as an additional pressure, the Christian workers were faced with a growing heresy within the church itself, which the elders refused to address. Since the elders tolerated this heresy, the Judge of all the earth found it necessary to step in and personally address this spiritual problem.

"These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze." These were familiar terms to the metal workers of Thyatira. The city was known for the brass armor made there. A coin of Thyatira showed Hephaestus, the divine smith of the Greek pantheon, hammering a helmet on an anvil. In Revelation 1:13 John referred to Jesus as "someone like a son of man," declaring him the Messiah from the book of Daniel. Here Jesus introduced himself as the Son of God (the only time he would do so in all the book of Revelation), and as the purifying and glorious Judge. These figures he used to describe himself were spiritual symbols of his ability to see right through the hearts and minds of his spiritual children and bring judgment upon their secret sins (see Romans 2:16; Hebrews 4:13; Isaiah 29:15; Psalm 90; Psalm 139).

Evaluation by the Son of God as a Judge was necessary, but first...

A word of encouragement

Revelation 2:19:

"I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."

Jesus was intimately aware of their deeds. Once again we find a church after the heart of the church at Ephesus: men and women in a pagan city who were faithfully living out their Christian lives based on the spiritual truth, "...We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

"I know...your love and faith..." It is obvious from this statement that these dear, hard-working Christian men and women were in love with the Lord, each other, and their neighbors. This agape love was missing in the church at Ephesus, but appears to have been fully expressed by these believers. It is also apparent that they were growing in their faith in the Lord by the power of the indwelling Spirit, which in turn enabled them to face the many daily trials they encountered in the trade guilds, their business pressures, and their social contacts.

"I know...your service and perseverance..." Their service was motivated by a heart of love and faith, and others within the church and community were blessed. They continued to persevere in their faith because their hearts were filled with the living hope that Jesus was coming, and he would one day take them to be with him (see 1 Peter 1:3-5). Paul had written to Christians in Thessalonica some forty years earlier, "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

"I know...that you are now doing more than you did at first." It is obvious that these believers were growing spiritually in their relationship with the Lord Jesus, and out of this growth came good fruit, which in turn blessed all who came in contact with them. I wonder if the Lord Jesus could say that our Christian lives are growing in love for him and each other. And could he say that out of our love for him, our faith, service, and perseverance are maturing in such a way that the surrounding community is aware of it?

First a word of encouragement, then the holy Judge offered...

A word of correction

Revelation 2:20-23:

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. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 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. 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.

Jesus reached back to the story of the prophet Elijah, King Ahab, and his evil wife Jezebel (see 1 Kings 16:28-2 Kings 9:37), who lived in northern Israel around the latter part of the ninth century B.C. Ahab was the eighth king of Israel, and he did evil in the sight of God. He married a Canaanite woman, Jezebel, who was the daughter of a pagan priest named Ethbaal, who himself worshipped Baal, killed his brother, and took his throne to become King of Sidon, Lebanon. Jezebel was a priestess who worshipped the goddess Astarte (later called Aphrodite by the Greeks and Venus by the Romans).

Ahab brought his new wife to Samaria, the capital city of the northern tribes, and she brought her gods and Baal priests with her in the hope that the Jews would compromise some of their beliefs. Baal was a fertility god, and Baal worship services included using male and female temple prostitutes in ungodly sexual practices to appease him. In time Jezebel had a temple and altar built to Astarte, and she appointed hundreds of false prophets to spread her heretical doctrine throughout the land. At the same time she went about trying to kill the prophet Elijah as well as all the other true prophets of God. According to 2 Kings 9:22, she was personally involved in sexual immorality and witchcraft. Jezebel ranks as the most evil woman in the Bible. She symbolizes people who totally reject the one and only living God and promote their own gods, causing their followers to enter into idolatry and all the sexual immorality connected with their sacred rites. "There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife" (1 Kings 21:25).

Our holy God calls his people to be holy in character and pure in living. The word translated holy in English is *kadosh* in Hebrew, meaning to be separate. In general it means that our God is holy in that he is awesome and full of power, purity, and majesty, which separates him from all that he has created (see Psalm 24:3 ff.). Our lives become holy when we come to the full realization that once we give him our life, it is no longer our own, for it has been bought with a price. Our life is now his, to be used for his purposes and his glory. The priests, Levites, and Nazirites were holy because they had separated themselves from the world and into the hands of God for his purposes. The psalmist wrote (Psalm 99:9):

"Exalt the Lord our God
And worship at His holy hill;
For holy is the Lord our God."

Man was made in the image of God and is capable of reflecting the divine likeness. As God reveals himself as ethically and morally holy, he calls man to a holiness resembling his own.

When we invite Jesus Christ to be our Lord, we are immediately saved or justified; our sins are forgiven, and we are accepted in the sight of God as one of his spiritual children. We are perfect in terms of our present standing before God, but we are still sinners in this world who are far from perfect in our actual thoughts and conduct. So once justified, we begin the process of sanctification in which God sets us apart for himself and begins to conform us to the image of his Son. This Christ-like lifestyle is possible when we depend on the Holy Spirit to provide the power necessary to choose to obey the commandments of God. Peter had written to these same churches some thirty years earlier: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14-16). If time permitted, I would demonstrate how the Father (see Ephesians 1:3-4), the Son (see Titus 2:13-14), and the Holy Spirit (see 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8) are working together to make us a holy person, a holy people, a holy church.

"By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality [fornication] and the eating of food sacrificed to idols." The Jezebel of the Old Testament was a queen of Israel, while the Jezebel in the church of Thyatira was a self-appointed prophetess. It appears that she was encouraging the Christians to become deeply involved in the life of the trade guilds and their various unholy activities of sexual immorality and idolatry. Both of these sins were practiced daily in the sacred rites of the Roman and Greek religions, but she was introducing these sins from within the church. Personal involvement in them would cause these Christians to compromise their basic moral and ethical standards and their witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This woman was calling the Christians to be unholy in character and impure in activity. All this in time may have

opened doors to some economical advantage, but it produced poverty of spirit. The name Jezebel is still used in Christianity to symbolize great evil, compromise, and apostasy in order to gain wealth and power. The elders of Ephesus had rejected any false apostle or prophet, but the elders of Thyatira were tolerating this self-appointed false prophetess and her teachings.

Sin No. 1: "...She misleads my servants into sexual immorality...." God had stated his case against sexual immorality when he told Moses to write the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Jesus had stated his case against sexual immorality when he said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). Paul stated to the Thessalonians, "For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God...." (1 Thessalonians 4:2-5).

Marriage is a gift of love from God to a man and woman who desire to commit themselves to a faithful and loving relationship with him and with each other until death parts them. Jesus said to the Pharisees who wanted to find ways to divorce their wives, "Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:4-6). The marriage relationship is designed by God to demonstrate the oneness and the faithfulness he desires to have with us.

Adultery occurs when a husband or a wife chooses to be unfaithful and break their commitment to their partner, and to become sexually involved mentally, emotionally, or physically with someone else outside that marriage bond. In the Old Testament God is pictured as the faithful husband of his bride Israel. In the New Testament Jesus is pictured as the faithful husband of his bride the church. In both pictures we find the bride leaving or being tempted to leave her Husband for another lover. Those in the church of Thyatira who followed the teaching of Jezebel were seen as adulteresses in the sight of God because they were leaving their spiritual marriage with their Husband Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews placed a warning before the Christian community: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (13:4). He will also judge unmarried believers who misuse their sexuality.

A very famous and flamboyant lawyer died this week in San Francisco. While the various family members are embattled in his legal affairs and refuse to allow him to rest in peace, his friends spend their time looking back over his long life. He was remembered for his long career, the many books he wrote, the cases he won, his custom-made Italian suits, and his womanizing, especially with a client of his named Errol Flynn. But these sober words were written by Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle (July 12, 1996): "I ran into my old friend....a few weeks ago... He put a shaky hand on my arm and said, 'Do you realize that when we die, we're dead for eternity? Think about that. Eternity is a long time, my friend. Good heavens, it's forever, not that I expect to go to heaven.' It was the first time I had seen terror in the eyes that usually twinkled. "Every time I see the sunrise, I thank the fella upstairs with the big first initial." But last Tuesday...he stopped talking about eternity... And so [my friend] passed into the eternity he dreaded, and we are left with memories of the elegant man with the seductive voice."

Sin No. 2: "...She misleads my servants into...the eating of food sacrificed to idols." When Christians violate the seventh commandment as a lifestyle, they are no longer worshipping the one and only true God. At that point they find it natural to immediately look for another god who will accommodate their sin. The Romans and Greeks were worshipping and giving honor and devotion not to the one and only living God, but to a human being, a god of their imagination, an animal, or a demon. Before the Romans or Greeks would go to their pagan temples to worship their gods, they would stop by the local meat market and purchase some part of a slain animal to offer as a sacrifice to be burned before their gods. When the pagan purchased meat and offered it to the idols, he knew he was involved in worshipping spirit beings from another world. The apostle Paul stated that those who worship idols are in reality worshipping demons (see 1 Corinthians 10:20). The new Christians began to realize this spiritual reality, so they avoided purchasing any meat that was dedicated to

idols, because they imagined the demons possessing the meat and, once they ate it, possessing them. The more mature Christians knew that meat was meat, and if the price was right they would purchase some from the local temple's meat market.

This practice confused the newer believers who had just been delivered by Jesus out of the kingdom of darkness, the world of idolatry controlled by Satan and his demons. Didn't the older Christians see the spiritual issues? Didn't they see the mixed message to anyone who might want to seriously consider accepting Jesus as their Lord? Didn't they understand that if they bought that meat, the seeker would not see the difference a relationship with Jesus could make! The Council of Jerusalem, which had met some fifty years earlier, understood the confusion nonbelievers would experience if Christians bought meat offered to idols. So they sent a letter to the new Gentile Christians telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality (see Acts 15:19-21; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8).

The offering of food to idols and demons continues today in most of the third-world countries, while the modern church continues to think it's not our problem. But in reality the heart never changes, only the objects of our worship and the rituals involved. Elizabeth O'Connor is a gifted writer now in her seventies who has encouraged countless saints to grow deeper in their walk with God. In her book entitled *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims* (2) she commented on the issue of idolatry: "The First Commandment...on the worship of idols begins to lay bare our own primitive selves. Some of us have looked into the face of our idols and found one of them is money. Though we along with millions of other church goers are saying that Jesus saves, we ask ourselves if we are not in practice acting as though it were money that saves. We say that money gives...power...corrupts...talks. Like the ancients with their molten calf we have endowed money with our own psychic energy, given it arms and legs, and have told ourselves that it can work for us. More than this we enshrine it in a secret place, give it a heart and a mind and the power to grant us peace and mercy."

Immorality and idolatry were and continue to be serious sins in the sight of Jesus, and in time they come under his judgment. "I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 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. I will strike her children dead." Our risen and fully glorified Lord and sovereign God had shown patience and mercy to this woman within this church, with the hope that she would come to her senses and repent of her sins. But finally Jesus saw with eyes like blazing fire that she was unwilling to repent of her spiritual adultery against her Husband Jesus. She may have taught that one could believe in Jesus as one god among so many.

Jesus, who wishes all men and women to be saved, saw that things had reached the point that some severe discipline needed to be applied to this person, her spiritual children, and her followers. Our Lord did not call Satan to bring some punishment upon her, but he stepped in personally. First he warned that he was going to place Jezebel, who had lain on a bed of sexual pleasure, on a bed of physical and emotional suffering. Then the Judge of all the earth moved in with judgment against her followers, telling them that they would experience intense judgment unless they repented (perhaps this is a reference to all the horrible sexual diseases that were running wild in the Roman and Greek world). Then he would strike dead her spiritual children who were spreading her deadly theology within the church. (It is of interest to note that in the Old Testament Ahab, Jezebel, and their three children all died unnatural deaths.)

The heart of God was filled with love for these people, but in this case the key to their spiritual health was their willingness to repent of their sins! So there is hope for all of us who have fallen into some horrible sin and are leading others into the same sin. The love of Jesus is deeper than any pit we may find ourselves in at this moment. Repent, change your heart and mind, and come back into a loving relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord; and by the power of the Holy Spirit, "be holy as I am holy!"

What was the motive behind the judgment of Christ? "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." Jesus gave a warning to all the other churches at that time and in the generations to come, up to this very hour: There is no secret sin that God will allow to remain in the heart and life of his spiritual children. In a song to God, Moses reminded himself and his readers that God knows our hearts and activities (Psalm 90:7-9):

"We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.

You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence."

There is no hiding from the presence, love, and power of our glorified Lord and Judge. John Stott wrote, "He whose eyes are like blazing fire also has feet...like burnished bronze. The eyes that see into the hidden depths of our hearts can also blaze with righteous anger, and his feet can trample us to powder."³

The Judge of all the earth offered a word of encouragement, a word of correction, and then...

A word of exhortation

Revelation 2:24-25:

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

There was a godly remnant of believers within this church who chose not to follow the teachings of this self-appointed prophetess whom Jesus called Jezebel. They were involved in the "deep things of God" (see 1 Corinthians 2:10), while she had lured her followers into her teachings by calling them the "deep secrets" of Satan. It was reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, when Satan tempted Eve to believe that God and his word were not enough; there were more secrets of life, secrets of knowledge from the other world, which, if she knew them, would make her like God (see Genesis 3). So much of the New Age literature is nothing more than a rerun of this basic premise. They are saying, "You can now know 'Satan's deep secrets,' for God has been holding out on us. Join our group and you will become part of our secret society. You will be given knowledge the rest of the world and the church don't possess at this time, and you will have an edge over them in coping with your current realities." All this is going on in our generation, in our community. Perhaps you are playing around with the deep secrets of Satan at this very moment. Get out of it, give it up, flee from it; or Jesus will bring judgment upon you for bringing your hellish theology into the church. But you who are faithful to Jesus in the midst of this confusion, hold on to what you have in truth about him until he comes again for all the world to see, the King of kings.

Just this week I received a phone call from a gracious woman living in another city. She told me she had been raised in the Christian faith, but in the last few years she had become involved in a far eastern religion that uses a mixture of God-words and New Age philosophy. Somehow she was having second thoughts about them in light of her Christian background, and wanted to know what I thought about her group. Seeking to tell the truth in love, I told her that based on several Scriptures that I read to her over the phone, she had strayed from the gospel of Jesus Christ. I gave her several additional Scriptures to read, which she said she would. Later she called me again and asked if I would review the manual of this religion and get back to her. I intend to do that with the hope that she will see the error of her choices and come back to spending the rest of her life learning about the deep things of God in contrast to the deep things of Satan. Please pray that her eyes will be opened to see once again Jesus as the Son of God and that she will accept him as her Lord and Savior.

A word of encouragement, a word of correction, a word of exhortation from the Lord of the church, and then...

Two promises from our risen Lord

Revelation 2:26-29:

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations---

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. I will also give him the morning star. He
who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The Father told the Son in Psalm 2:8-9,

"Ask of me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.

You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery."

This is a reference to our Lord Jesus' setting up his kingdom on earth during his thousand-year reign in righteousness. It also refers to the breakup of all the great world powers at the time of his second coming. Somehow the faithful believers will rule (in Greek *poimaino*, to shepherd, to tend as a flock of sheep) the nations with Jesus. We will have a place of privilege as well as responsibility. As God the Father gave Jesus authority over the nations, so he will give authority to those who overcome and do his will up to the moment he appears in his second coming, so they can rule with him over the nations (see Phil. 2:9-11). This will all occur before the new heavens and the new earth.

In 1 Peter 1:19 and Revelation 22:16 our Lord Jesus is called the Morning Star. The morning star is the one that appears just before the dawn, when the night is the darkest. The ministry of Jesus as prophesied by Isaiah (42:6) was the joy of bringing the light of truth to a world that was walking in great darkness. The world will be found in the darkest moral night just before Christ returns, in all the brilliance and glory of his truth, to expose evil. So he will give those who are faithful to him the same ministry. First the morning star and then the brightness of the Son. Those within the church of Thyatira who had rejected the person called Jezebel and her teaching of darkness would receive the Bright and Morning Star, Christ himself, and in his power they would be able to be holy as he is holy! "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." A promise to the Christians of Thyatira, a promise to us.

Our fully glorified Lord Jesus issued a call for holiness to the church of Thyatira, and to all the churches in that period of time and in each generation since. Our holy God calls his people to be holy in character and pure in living. Our lives become holy when they are separated from our own use and given into his hands to be used for his purpose and glory. He calls men and women to a holiness resembling his own. Paul had written to the Romans some fifty years earlier, "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. 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" (Romans 12:1-2).

Repent---change your minds. If you are still following the teachings of Satan through the self-appointed prophetess Jezebel, there is still time to repent before the Judge of all the earth moves against you with an intense judgment.

"Devotion signifies a life given or devoted to God. The devout, therefore, are people who do not live their own will, or in the way and spirit of the world, but only to the will of God. Such people consider God in everything, serve God in everything, and make every aspect of their lives holy by doing everything in the name of God and in a way that conforms to God's glory."

Notes:

1. *Devotional Classics*, ed. Richard J. Foster and J.B. Smith. San Francisco: Harper, 1993, p. 190.
2. *What Christ Thinks of the Church*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984, p. 67.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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