

THE MORNING STAR

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 2:18-29
Sixth Message
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Revelation 2:18-29

A few weeks ago, for our seventieth anniversary as a church, we showed you some videos of Elaine Stedman, the widow of our first pastor, Ray Stedman. It was my privilege to interview her for those videos and to spend about six hours total with her and two of her daughters in Medford, Oregon. It was an awesome experience that I'll always cherish.

Elaine said, "The church didn't just mean church to me; it meant a person: the person." That person, of course, is Jesus Christ. At age ninety-six, Elaine radiated the presence of that person.

In Revelation 2:18-29, Jesus criticizes a church for tolerating a false teacher and her false teaching. Resisting false teaching has much to do with savoring Christ, the way Elaine has savored Christ.

King who judges

Revelation 2:18-19:

"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

For the only time in the book of Revelation, Jesus is identified as the Son of God, a title that means king. Later in his address to the church, Jesus will allude to Psalm 2, in which God says ultimately to the Messiah, the ultimate king of Israel and king of the world, "You are my Son" (Psalm 2:7, Revelation 2:26-27). The god Apollo and his son Zeus occupied a prominent place in Thyatira. The true God and his Son upstage the pagan gods.

Harking back to his appearance to John in a vision in Revelation 1:12-26, Jesus says he has eyes like flames, which portray him as a judge with penetrating vision, and feet like burnished bronze, which symbolize strength and purity.

As an all-powerful king who judges with penetrating vision and purity, Jesus praises the church as a whole for

its works, which are evidence of its patience endurance (the word "you" in verse 19 is singular).¹ The works consist of love, faith, and service.

The object of love is unspecified, which leaves love open to be both love for God and love for others, with love for others being an expression of love for God. The church in Ephesus left its first love, but the church in Thyatira is persevering in love (Revelation 2:4). The church is persevering in faith, which involves not only belief in Jesus but also allegiance to him. Finally, the church is persevering in service, presumably service to others, which is a manifestation of its service to God.

The church is not only enduring, it is also improving: its latter works (love, faith, service) are in some way greater than its earlier works. Again, this is in contrast to the church in Ephesus, which Jesus told, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first" (Revelation 2:5).

Jesus is an all-powerful king who judges with penetrating vision and purity. His rulings are rooted in perfect justice. Insofar as people appeal to Jesus these days, they are more likely to appeal to him as a savior or a teacher than as a judge. However, if we long for justice, and Jesus administers perfect justice, then it makes sense to appeal to him as judge also.

Jesus praises the church in Thyatira. He has something against it, however.

Too tolerant

Revelation 2:20-23:

But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

I have to confess, I don't like the use of this language. I don't like hearing Jesus say, "I have this against you." But it's Jesus speaking, so I have to listen.

On the one hand, Jesus praises the church in Thyatira, in contrast to the church in Ephesus, for its love and works. On the other hand, Jesus criticizes the church in Thyatira for tolerating the false teaching of "that woman Jezebel," in contrast to the church in Ephesus, which "cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false" (Revelation 2:2). In some ways, the church in Thyatira is in better shape than the church in Ephesus; in other ways, the church in Ephesus is in better shape than the church in Thyatira.

Jezebel, presumably not her real name, was a false teacher who was winning a following in Thyatira. It's likely that Jesus calls her Jezebel because she mirrors the woman by that name who deceived Israel (1 Kings 16:31, 18:1-5, 19:1-3, 21:5-24). This woman claims to be a prophet of God, but her teaching is contrary to God's will. She seduces, or leads astray, just like the false prophet, Satan, and Babylon later in the book of Revelation (Revelation 12:9, 20:3, 8, 10; 13:14, 19:20).

Specifically, her seductive teaching encourages Jesus' servants—his followers—to "practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols." The false teaching in Pergamum had the same effect (Revelation 2:14). Historians and scholars inform us that Thyatira was a hub of trade guilds, which had patron deities. To participate fully in the guilds meant participating in pagan feasts, which featured both sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols. Evidently, "Jezebel" was teaching that you could both follow Jesus and participate in the pagan feasts, much like the Israelites of old imagined that they could worship the Lord and still offer sacrifices to pagan gods.

The prospects for Jezebel and those who adhere to her teaching are not promising. Jesus has given her time to repent of her idolatry, but her time is up. Literally she does not "want" to repent. If she has committed spiritual adultery and has practiced sexual immorality, presumably on a bed, then Jesus will "throw her onto a sickbed," presumably striking her with a terminal illness. In this case, justice is poetic.

Time is not yet up for her followers, but Jesus warns them that if they don't repent, he will throw them into "great tribulation" of some sort. If they persist to the point that they can be described as "her children," however, Jesus will strike them dead, evidently with an incurable disease, just like he will strike Jezebel dead.

Is this Jesus? Isn't this Old Testament stuff: "I will strike her children dead"? What did John do with Jesus?

Well, it's not what John did with Jesus; it's what Jesus is doing with John. Jesus reveals himself to John—and to us—in the book of Revelation as a righteous king and judge who will ultimately vanquish evil.

When Jesus kills Jezebel and her followers, "all the churches" will know that he is king and judge, with penetrating eyes that can search "mind and heart" in order to pass sentence, giving to "each of you according to your works." ² In this case, the works calling for judgment are "her works"—that is, the idolatrous works of Jezebel. Jesus wants all the churches to know what comes of this sort of idolatry so that they will remain faithful to him.

Jesus wanted the church to take action against Jezebel, instead of tolerating her, in order to keep the false teaching from spreading, but because the church hasn't done so, he takes action himself. The loving, caring thing to do, especially for the sake of the people in the church, would have been to rebuke and discipline Jezebel.

Jesus-plus

Tolerance is praised in our world. Intolerance is condemned. However, no one is universally tolerant. Who argues that we should tolerate *everything*? Moreover, there is significant agreement about what should and shouldn't be tolerated. For example, most people are intolerant of human trafficking. We as a church are partnering with the International Justice Mission to combat cyber-sex trafficking. Who would accuse us of being intolerant?

How do we know what we should tolerate and what we shouldn't tolerate? Because our world by and large no longer appeals to universal truth, all it has to appeal to is opinion. Is there a way, however, for us to move beyond mere opinion? There is a way, and that way is to submit to God's will as revealed in the Scriptures.

Jesus informs us that some teachers and their teaching should not be tolerated in the church because they encourage believers to adopt beliefs and practices contrary to the will of God. Insofar as it continues to advocate faith in Jesus, much false teaching might be termed Jesus-plus:

- You can have Jesus *and* sex outside of marriage.
- You can have Jesus *and* other gods.
- Jesus *wants* you to have sex outside of marriage.
- Jesus *wants* you to have other gods.
- Jesus *wants* you to be rich.

In a 2017 survey of 1,010 Americans who attend a Protestant and non-denominational churches, sixty-nine percent agreed with the statement, “God wants me to prosper financially.” Of those who identified as evangelical, seventy-five percent agreed that God wants them to prosper financially.³ No doubt many of those have been seduced by false teaching.

That’s not to say that there’s anything necessarily wrong with being rich. Most of us in this room, by the world’s standards, would be considered rich. It is to say that Jesus doesn’t promise you riches, at least not in the Scriptures. He promises you spiritual riches, which are yours in part now and will be yours in full later, in the new creation, provided that you believe in him:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time(1 Peter 1:3-5).

Some false teachers more or less tell you that Jesus doesn’t want anything more for you than you already want for yourself.

We must affirm at this point, however, that desire is good. To want is good. Desire is God-given. The very fact that God made us sexual beings with sexual desires should tell us something. Augustine said, “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing.” The question is, “What will you do with your desire?”

What you have

Revelation 2:24-25:

But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. 25 Only hold fast what you have until I come.

Jesus now addresses not the church as a whole but certain individuals within the church who “do not hold this teaching”—that is, the teaching of Jezebel. Jezebel promised that if you followed her, you would learn “the deep things of Satan,” although she more likely said you would learn “the deep things of God.” In reality, though, her teaching is Satanic, inasmuch as Satan inspires the worship of other gods.

Jesus lays on those who do not adhere to the false teaching no other “burden.” On the one hand, God gave prophets “burdens,” or oracles, to discharge. On the other hand, John says that God’s commandments “are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). A burden, then, is something that God wants you to do, and if you don’t do it, you will feel burdened. If you do it, the burden is released.

Up to this point, the only thing that could be called a burden in Jesus’ address to the church is its failure to rebuke and discipline the false prophet. At this point, the church might be feeling that burden—and the necessity to address any false teaching in the future.

Beyond that, Jesus tells those who don’t adhere to the false teaching simply to “hold fast” to what they “have.” Literally, in verse 24, they do not “have this teaching”—this false teaching—but they are now to hold fast to what they “have.” What do they have? Most importantly, they have Jesus.

Savor what you have

What do believers in Jesus have? Many things, of course, but let us not forget that as believers in Jesus we have . . . Jesus! We have Jesus and what he gives us. Do we know what we have? Do we appreciate what we have? Spiritual growth consists not least in growing in appreciation for what we have: growing in appreciation for Jesus—for who he is, for what he has done, for what he is doing, for what he will do. One of the ways to hold fast to what we have is to savor what we have, for if we don’t savor what we have, why would we hold fast to it?

Since we announced that we would be preaching through the book of Revelation, many of you have told us that you’re excited about diving into this book. In fact, in all my twenty-four years at PBC, I’ve never heard such enthusiasm for our choice in subject matter. I’m excited too, for many reasons, not least for Revelation’s portrayal of Christ.

I love the Gospels, but the Gospels give us an incomplete picture of Christ. They mostly give us a pre-glorified vision of Christ. Revelation, on the other hand, also gives us a glorified vision of Christ. If you’re unfamiliar with the book of Revelation, or if you’ve put it down because it’s too confusing, or if you’ve looked at primarily because you think it’s telling us something about the end times, then you will see Jesus in new ways.

Jeff Louie, our newest pastor, used to be a professor at Western Seminary, where he taught, among other things, Christology: the study of Christ. He now says that if he had it to do over again, he would begin the course with a study of Christ in the book of Revelation,

which presents the most complete picture of Christ in the Scriptures.

If familiarity breeds contempt, or at least apathy, we need ways of looking at the familiar and seeing it differently. G.K. Chesterton says, “Our perennial spiritual and psychological task is to look at things familiar until they become unfamiliar again.” As we look at Jesus in the book of Revelation, he will become unfamiliar again. This is Jesus as we’ve never seen him before. As he becomes unfamiliar again, we will gain new appreciation for him and thus hold fast to him.

We will understand that who he is, not to mention what he has done for us, what he is doing for us, and what he will do for us, meets our deepest desires, and such an understanding will disabuse us of the Jesus-plus approach to meeting our desires. In the book of Revelation, Jesus dazzles us. Just wait until we get to Revelation 5! We must continually discover and rediscover the greatness of Christ.

Paul warns the Corinthians, “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. 3 But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2-3).

To move away from the Jesus-plus approach to meeting our desires, we need to cultivate a “a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” The book of Revelation, with its powerful portrayal of Christ, will help us do that.

What do we have? Jesus. Savor what you have. What will we get?

The morning star

Revelation 2:26-29:

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. 28 And I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Jesus, as in each of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 1-2, addresses “the one who conquers,” but only in this letter does he say that the one who conquers must do something to receive what has been promised. In this way, Jesus defines one who conquers as one “who keeps my works until the end.” For the men and women in Thyatira, conquering means continuing to do what

they’ve been doing.

Jesus will give the one who conquers “authority over the nations.” In the book of Revelation, “the nations” are opposed to God. Jesus, who has authority over the nations, shares his authority with his followers (Matthew 28:18-19). Although his followers have authority now to “make disciples of all the nations,” Jesus here is looking, as elsewhere in Revelation 2-3, to his final coming, the final judgment, and the new creation. Jesus’ followers will have a role in the judgment. Jesus says the same sort of thing in Luke 22:28-30, as does Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:2.

Specifically Jesus’ followers will rule the nations “with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces.” Jesus, as the Son of God, rules in this way (Psalm 2:7-9; Acts 4:25-28, 13:33; Romans 1:4; Hebrews 1:2,5, 5:5, 7; Revelation 12:5, 19:15).

When earthen pots don’t pass inspection because they are defective, they are destroyed, broken in pieces. Those who reject the Son of God will in the end be rejected. Those who don’t “want” to repent, like Jezebel, those who don’t want Jesus, will not get Jesus.

Ah, but Jesus will give to his followers “the morning star.” The appearance of the morning star signals a new day, and, symbolically, a new age, marked by Jesus’ messianic reign (Numbers 24:14-20, Isaiah 11:1.). Later in the book, Jesus will define himself both as “the root and descendant of David”—that is, the Messiah, the Son of God—and “the bright morning star,” who reigns in the new and final age (Revelation 22:16). In the end, his followers, who will reign with him, will get . . . him!

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

Anticipate what you’ll get

What do we have? Jesus. What will we get? Jesus. But take note of the image used for Jesus here. He’s the morning star. Jesus will give us the morning star. He will bring with him a new day, a new age, new hope, new possibilities, and new adventures. It may be dark now, but a new day is coming.

Dave Gehring has led music for us at the Fall Retreat for many years. Dave does a nineteenth-century hymn every year, and he knows I love it, so maybe he throws it in there every year just for me: “The Sands of Time” or, alternatively, “Immanuel’s Land.”

It originally contained nineteen verses. I took all nineteen verses with me on a personal retreat a few years back and meditated on them. Anyway, the hymn captures what Jesus offers us as the morning star. Here's the first verse:

The sands of time are sinking,
The dawn of heaven breaks;
The summer morn I've sighed for,
The fair, sweet morn awakes:
Dark, dark hath been the midnight,
But dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's land.

Immanuel is a name for Jesus that means "God with us." You have Jesus. You will get Jesus. Enjoy what there is now to enjoy while waiting with eager anticipation for what's to come.

New adventure

Elaine Stedman said church to her was about "a person, the person": Jesus. She also said, regarding her time at PBC, "It was an adventure." It was evident to me that Elaine was also looking forward to a new and eternal adventure with her Lord. It was almost as if she could reach out and touch the morning star.

Jezebel didn't "want" to repent. What do you want? Is Jesus in there somewhere? If so, he can work with that. Could it possibly be that Jesus wants for you even more than what you want for yourself?

Savor what you have. Anticipate what you'll get. Savor what you have while anticipating what you'll get.

EndNotes

- ¹ Literally, the first part of verse 19 reads, "I know your works and love and faith and service and your patient endurance." The pronoun "your" appears in connection with works, at the beginning of the list, and with patient endurance, at the end. The link suggests that works are evidence of endurance.
- ² Jesus depicts himself and his actions similar to the way the Lord depicts himself and his actions in Jeremiah 17:10.
- ³ Bob Smietana, "Prosperity Gospel Taught to Four in Ten Evangelical Churchgoers," *Christianity Today* (July 2018).