

The Seven Letters of Highly Effective Churches – Thyatira

19th Sunday after Pentecost,
October 11, 2009

We're continuing to learn about what Jesus says to the churches in the opening chapters of Revelation, and what He still says to us today. I invite you to open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2, beginning with verse 18 as we look at the 4th letter Jesus had sent to a church to help it become a highly effective church.

Let me ask you something: on average, how many hours a week would you say you work? The average work week in America is 47 hours, and that does not include travel time to and from the place of employment, nor does it include work that people are not paid for such as housework, yard work, taking care of family members, grocery shopping and all those other things we do each week outside of a paying job. Do you know what else? That amount of 47 hours per week is not actually totally accurate – that figure is from 1997. Do you think things have sped up or slowed down in the past 12 years in terms of demands placed on our time and the things we are asked to do?

We are working more and more, and the question is if we have anything of worth to show for it. This is the situation the church in Thyatira was experiencing. Let's take a moment to set the context.

First, Thyatira was known for being a producer of purple dye used for coloring clothing. Next to verse 18 you can write Acts 16:11-15. It is in these verses we read about the first convert to Christianity from Thyatira, a business woman named Lydia. Lydia was a 'dealer in purple cloth' as it says in Acts, and she came to believe in Jesus through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the Apostle Paul. It's not going to be too much of a stretch to say that the people in Thyatira *may* have first heard about Jesus through the testimony of Lydia when she returned to her hometown after listening to Paul and being baptized.

Let's take a look at what Jesus said to this church. *"I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."*

This was a church that had a lot of 'stuff' going on. In today's language, this was the church to go to if you wanted a lot of programs and events. In fact, the longer they were in existence, the more they did, and the bigger their reputation got for being a church that did things.

And that was part of the problem. The church was relying on what they were doing, what they were known for, rather than their devotion to Jesus. Notice this is the only good thing Jesus can say about this church – they are busy doing good things. Immediately after that he levels them:

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.

Whoa! This church that was a ‘doing’ church had a major problem. In the ‘doing’, they forgot one very important thing: there is no room in a Jesus-church (remember our first sermon in this series) for tolerating open sin in their midst. Take a look again at what Jesus said, “*I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel...*” The problem Jesus had with this church is that they were a tolerant church.

“Well, maybe the word that gets translated as “tolerate” doesn’t actually mean that!” No, the word in Greek is ἀφίημι, [*aphiemi* /af·ee·ay·mee/] and it means, literally, “to permit, allow, not to hinder.”

This church was called out because they were permissive of sin in their midst – open, ongoing, unrepentant sin: sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols. All their good works weren’t going to help them. The problem wasn’t the ‘good works’ they were doing, the problem was what they *weren’t* doing: they weren’t calling sin, ‘sin’, and were allowing it, a.k.a.: tolerating it, right in their own assembly. In today’s language, they were being “politically correct.” No amount of being loving or doing sacrificial works can compensate for tolerance of evil. The church was permitting a false prophetess to influence the people and lead them into compromise. What was acceptable to that society was abhorred by Christ. Take a good look at what Jesus says:

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. Not only is this woman going to have to answer for her sins, but so are her children – that is, those who went along with her and tolerated her presence and activities and influences, and even participated in them – committing adultery not only in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense by committing adultery against her Husband, Jesus, unless they repent of their ways – turn around and stop doing what they were. They will be repaid according to what they were doing as it relates to their relationship to her.

Who is this Jezebel? First, next to her name you can write 1st Kings chapters 16 and 19. These chapters give an insight into the historical Jezebel and what she was like and how she almost wiped out the true worship of God in her time. In Thyatira, there was *this* woman Jesus called “Jezebel.” This person was some self-styled prophetess closely attached to the church of Thyatira – more than likely a member. She had ingrained herself into the life of the church to

such an extent, she was able to get people to listen to her, and thus was able to influence people and change the focus on the church from worshipping Jesus to accepting and practicing sin, almost wiping out the true worship of Jesus. And all the while the church just continued down the path of doing a lot of ‘good things’, relying on, and feeling proud of those things, and themselves, for doing them.

When I was in Kindergarten, there were only four people in my class – Brad, Lori, April and me. We sat around a semi-circle table, much like the one we have in the fellowship hall downstairs. I especially still remember April. Not because she was a nice person, not because I had a crush on her, and not because she was the top of the class. I remember April because she wore heavy, black shoes, and while wearing those heavy, black shoes she took it upon herself to start kicking me under the table. That kicking continued for what seemed like many, many days, and I would go home with black and blue marks on my legs.

After being kicked a number of times in the same spot on your leg, you can’t really feel the kicks anymore, because your leg’s gone numb! When I couldn’t necessarily feel them to the same extent I could when she first started kicking me, it became much easier for me to tolerate her actions. Sure I was bruised, but it didn’t hurt anymore. In fact, if you were to ask me – and boy, oh boy, did my momma ask me when she saw the bruises on my leg – I would have said (and did say), “It doesn’t hurt so much after the first few kicks.”

I had gotten numb to the pain and didn’t really even realize the pain April was causing me. My parents made me tell my teacher, Mrs. Yore, and show her my leg. She, in turn, talked to April and her parents, then moved the two of us apart and I got to sit next to Lori who was a very nice girl who didn’t kick people, and the next thing I knew, Kindergarten opened up for me and I was learning more and more and growing deeper and deeper in my knowledge.

I didn’t know what I was missing in Kindergarten with April’s antics until her sin was called out and a stop was put to it. No, she wasn’t ‘hurting’ me as in leaving permanent scarring or bruising, but she was hurting me more by keeping me from the business of doing the work I was there to do – learn and grow.

How many April’s are there in churches today? How many Jezebel’s are there in churches today? Those who ‘do’ things, but whose devotion is to the things more than it is to Jesus? Those whose focus is on the ‘things’ and the glory they get for themselves for doing them, rather than the Savior and giving Him glory? Those who have turned their back on what God tells us in His Word and do whatever they want to do, and even encourage others to *tolerate* it? And how much do they influence the life and heart of a church, without the people in the church even realizing it?

How many people have grown numb to sin without knowing it, and are relying on the things they do and the activities in their lives, rather than on a relationship with Jesus?

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.

Hold on. Hold on until He comes, because when He comes there will be the devil to pay (literally) for those who tolerated sin, for those who led others astray, for those who relied on their good deeds.

But for the overcomers, that's a different story!

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.

Circle or underline or somehow make a note of the last word, "churches." This letter is written to Thyatira, but the message is for more than just them; it's for the churches – plural. It's not just a bit of advice for one parish in a city in Asia, but for all churches in all times and in all places.

Next to verse 27 you can write "Psalm 2" – that's where this quote is from. Now don't miss this because it's VERY important. Jesus and Jesus alone has the authority to rule over the nations, and because He has this authority, He is able to share it with whomever He wants – and He does. He shares it with those who cling to the truth found in Him.

What about doing the will of Jesus as He tells us in His Word, and makes clear in this letter? You can write Deuteronomy 30:11-14 in the margins of your Bibles:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

... and Matthew 11:30, *My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

Overcome, Jesus says. It's not impossible, it's not too hard, and we're called in very clear unmistakable language what it means to do it. Those who overcome will be the last ones standing when the others have been cast on their bed of suffering. Those who clung to the truth of His Word will share in the victory with Jesus when He comes back a second time. Not only that, but Jesus will give them the morning star – Himself. They will be with Him, and He with them forever.

When that happens, the overcomer's joy will never end.

When that happens, the overcomer's peace will know no end.

When that happens, those who tolerated sin, those who led others astray, those who relied on their good deeds will finally come face-to-face with the sins they never repented of, and will be gone forever.

The first lesson for a highly effective church was love Jesus for who He is and what He's called us to.

The second lesson for a highly effective church was don't compromise.

The third lesson for a highly effective church continued the theme of not compromising: overcome the world.

This fourth lesson for a highly effective church is from verse 25: hold on. Hold on to the truth of the Word of God.

Let's pray.

Jesus, thank You for the clear instructions You give to Your churches of all ages to help them be a "Jesus-church." Help these letters continue to minister knowledge and wisdom to those 'who have an ear to hear with the Spirit says.' Help these letters to bring confession, repentance, absolution and healing to all Your children.

Jesus, our world today is not that much different from the world at the time You dictated this letter. The same things are still here and still causing difficulties for us. The same sins, the same pride, the same focus on everything else except Your clear word. The same type of busy-ness and political correctness still tries to get into Your church and keep us from You.

Holy Spirit, come to Your churches and reignite a fire and passion in them for Your Word. Send a 'revival' to Your church and move us to be what You would have us. Bring us to our knees in confession and repentance and praise and thanksgiving and adoration and tears of joy.

We pray it in Jesus' name,

Amen.