

Revelation: A Message to Thyatira

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, Watermark. My name is Alfie, and I direct the university ministry here at Watermark Community Church. I've been here for about two years, just over two years. And there are a lot of things I love about Watermark.

I love that we are a traveling church, that we move around. Some people don't like that, but I really do enjoy being in new spaces. I love that people are changing, that we get to hear the lives of people's stories and how they're coming to know Christ.

I love that sometimes we have little kids dancing in the front. And I love that, you know, earlier today I was told off not wearing a blue shirt. I love baptisms. I love the stories of people being saved.

It reminds me of how I was saved, and it reminds me of the cross and how beautiful it is. But the cross brings two things to mind. The sin that plagues our lives and the price that is paid for it.

I'm going to be honest with you guys, this is not going to be an easy message. Not for me, and not for you either. In it, we're going to talk a lot about sin, about sex, and about idols in our hearts.

[1 : 1 4] I'm going to see what it looks like in the world, in the church, in our hearts. And my hope is that at the end of this, that you wouldn't be left in a pit of despair, but that together we would turn to the cross, and we would see how beautiful it is.

Just as a matter of a note, on your bulletin it says a letter to Pergamum. That is a typo. It should say Thyatira.

Another thing to note is that I've had a bit of a sore throat, so if I take breaks to cough, please bear with me. Okay, let's start with sin. Sin is our actions, our thoughts, our words that show our hearts, hearts that are in rebellion against the God of the universe.

There are things we do or say that demonstrate that our heart is saying, God, no, I don't want to obey your law. I'm going to do this my way, and that my desires and this world are worth more glory than you.

I think there are few things that turn our minds and our hearts away from God and towards sin more than sex. About sex and money, the writer Paul Tripp says, neither sex nor money can deliver the promises that we think they are making, and each area is more dangerous than we tend to think.

[2 : 4 3] Both function today and in the surrounding culture like spiritual solvents eating away at the very fabric of human community. He goes on to say that both have the perverse power to master your hearts, and in doing so, determine the direction of your lives.

Sex in and of itself is not a bad thing, but a desire for sex, when God and his law and his will isn't at the center of it, can easily grow into addiction, into insanity, into a spiraling pit of sin, and it doesn't get much better when we think about other things.

When we talk about money, when we talk about our work, I think that our hearts are very easy. They very easily make idols of anything or anyone, whether it's good or bad.

I think more than anything else, sex and money has gripped the lives of our world, has gripped the hearts of our culture. I think it's sucking away at our souls, at the church.

I think that the church can't escape. It is true for the church today. It's true for Watermark. It's true for the church in Thyatira.

[3 : 59] So, this is what we're going to do. I'm going to talk about the city briefly. We'll look at what God says is good. We'll look at things that God says is bad about the church.

We'll try and figure out how they got there. I'm going to then ask, what about us? Do we do the same things? We're going to see what kind of judgment they have in store.

But in the end, when the dust settles, I hope to show you where we find our hope. I hope to see that, I hope that you will see the cross at the end of this.

I think it's very important that you listen to that part, because if you don't, it will just be half an hour of me beating you guys up and showing you where all the sin is in your heart. I think, you know, if you're not listening to the end, if you're not looking for the cross, then all that is pointless.

Thyatira's letter is the longest one that Jesus writes to the seven churches. But incidentally, Thyatira was one of the smallest cities. You'll find it right now in modern Turkey, and Thyatira is in the middle of this long valley on the road to Pergamum.

[5 : 10] It was in the middle of a valley, and it wasn't very easy to defend. So invading armies that were trying to capture the bigger, wealthier Pergamum would always come and run over Thyatira on their way through.

The city was burnt down and rebuilt and burnt down and rebuilt. And when Alexander the Great came through, and he had his little seat of power in Pergamum, he used Thyatira as a military barracks.

It wasn't until about 190 B.C. when the Roman Empire expanded and peace came to the region. And we see that it took on an identity of its own.

It began to develop industries, bronze, clothing, and the precious purple dyes that made royal robes. The industries grew to such an extent that historians actually marvel at the number of trade guilds that were found in the city.

Really, a city with that number of trade guilds should have been much, much bigger. Because of that, Thyatira was a wealthy city. In Acts 16, we see the story of a lady from Thyatira, Lydia.

[6 : 19] We see that Paul goes and meets her in Philippi and by the river, and we see in Acts 16 the story of her conversion. And we think that she might have been instrumental in planting the church in Thyatira.

So this church. Let's look at the good things that God has to say. In verse 19, he says, I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

So far, so good. They're doing all the things that a church should do. They have love. They have faith. They're serving. And it's the kind of church that I would like to be in because they're growing. It's not that we're just going to have a little bit of love now and then we'll keep that forever.

They've been growing. Their love has been increasing. Their faith is increasing. They're more willing to serve. The church is almost the opposite of the first church we looked at, Ephesus.

You know, Ephesus, God berates them and tells them that you guys are so obsessed with right doctrine and orthodoxy that you've forgotten your first love. You've forgotten love and faith. But Thyatira hadn't.

[7 : 27] On love and faith, they were good. In verse 20, however, Jesus says, but this I have against you.

And this is where the trouble begins because Jesus tells them, I've had it with you guys and your rampant sexual immorality. I'm tired of you guys repeatedly going to these idol feasts and eating food that's been sacrificed to idols.

In Acts 15, a council of church leaders gathered in Jerusalem and they were there to settle a dispute. Now there was confusion about what was expected of Gentile believers when they came to faith.

Some said that they had to be circumcised. Some said that they didn't. Some people, after they were converted, continued to live lives that they always had. Others went on and adopted, you know, the Jewish moral standards.

And the council gathered to clear up this confusion. And so they said that circumcision was no longer required for believers, but they gave four things that believers were to stay away from as a mark of their salvation.

[8 : 32] The first three had to do with ceremonial purity. They were not supposed to eat animals that had been strangled. They weren't supposed to be in contact with blood.

They weren't supposed to eat food sacrificed to idols. And they would stay away from sexual immorality. Of these four things, Thyatira had failed on two counts.

I said earlier that Thyatira had a huge number of trade guilds. These were workers groups, kind of like a workers' union, except instead of membership fees and strikes, they had feasts where they would eat food that had been offered to various gods and idols.

And after they were done with these feasts, they would feast on each other's bodies sexually. Being any kind of craftsman or tradesman in this city meant that either you were in these guilds and you took part in these activities, or you stood outside where you lost the benefits of membership.

Members in the church in Thyatira were involved in these and the pagan worship they took part in. They traded their religious integrity for job security. John records Jesus' words.

[9 : 46] He says that you tolerate that woman, Jezebel. Their membership in the trade guilds wasn't their biggest crime.

Jesus says that there's the woman, Jezebel, that was seducing God's people, that was tearing them away. He says that, yes, there's pressure to join these guilds from outside, but the problem is inside your church.

There's this woman, Jezebel, and she is a false teacher in their midst. And to make it worse, she says that she's a prophetess. She's saying that the message that she has for the people is from God, that God is telling this church in Thyatira that they should be sexually immoral, that they should be eating this food, the food that's been sacrificed to idols.

The sin of Thyatira was that while these lies were being spread that they did nothing about it, that they tolerated Jezebel, and they let her move into a position of leadership.

Now, I don't think that this woman was actually called Jezebel. I don't know anybody who names their child that. Jezebel was a woman who we know of in the Old Testament in 1 and 2 Kings.

[10 : 56] She was the wife of King Ahab. She wasn't an Israelite. She came from Phoenicia. Her father, King Ethbaal, was named after the pagan gods. And so she came and married King Ahab, and her time in the royal court of Israel consisted of rounding up God's prophets and his priests and killing them, replacing them with her own prophets, with her own priests.

She drew the nation of Israel out of its worship to God to the worship of these other, these idols, to worshipping idols and taking part in cult prostitution.

In the end, she was punished by God. The story says that she fell out of a window, and when she hit the ground, she died instantly, and that her body was eaten up by dogs. All that was left were her feet.

This is the kind of woman that was leading the church in Thyatira away from God. For Thyatira, Jezebel wasn't an outside force coming in.

Jezebel was within the congregation. She was a leader there. You know, if they were like Smyrna, if the trouble was coming from outside, then their judgment probably wouldn't be so harsh.

[12 : 10] But they had allowed Jezebel to come into this position of leadership in their church and draw them away from the worship of God and turn them towards idols.

The church in Thyatira brings a strong warning and a reminder to us that the enemy, that Satan, isn't just attacking us on the outside, but he's warring against us in our innermost beings, in our hearts.

It's true for Thyatira. It's true for us. It's true for every person. Here. If Satan isn't attacking you on the outside, then he's probably attacking you on the inside. And if you don't sense him attacking you on either side, then maybe he sees that you're not worth attacking, that he's already had you completely.

Jezebel is a deceiver, and she carries these characteristics into Thyatira because it's only by lies and untruths, by twisting what God had said, by twisting the truth about who God is and what the gospel is, that she could convince God's people to depart from what God had commanded them.

You know, I think the things that she said wouldn't be too different from some things that we hear in the world today. You know, it could be that, you know what, your bodies and your souls are separate, that neither one has an effect on another.

[13 : 34] You know, do the things that you must in your flesh because it's only in your flesh. Your spirit won't be harmed. Or this lie, that the laws of the church are old, they're old-fashioned, they're traditional and intolerant, and they don't apply to us anymore.

Or this lie, that you know what, God put these desires in you, and it's a sin not to go and satisfy them. God is out of touch to the world.

If he'd been in the world and experienced these things, then maybe the laws would be a little bit different. Or we are more enlightened than Moses was, so we can allow for more things.

Or, this one, Paul writes about it, that God's grace is big, and by sinning more, we make God's grace bigger, so we should sin to make God more beautiful. That's a lie.

She would have told them that if you're in Christ, these pagan things have no effect on you. That actually, maybe, to know that your faith is real, you should get involved with the deep things of Satan, because then you'll know that you're truly separate, and you can truly resist, you've truly mastered your desires.

[14 : 50] Lies. Lies. And it's not an attack from the outside, it was from inside, it's like the poison apple in Snow White. In the outside, it's red, and beautiful, and perfect, but when you open it up, there's only death.

Who was there to say no? Who was there in Thyatira to say that this is not right, that this woman is telling lies, that you guys need to repent and turn back to God?

What you must understand is that in Thyatira, these things were totally normal. These were things that happened in the culture around them. If you went home today and you stood in your lift and you're going up and your neighbor was talking about how the meat at the idol feast was a little bit stringy, you might wonder what they're up to.

If they then went on to complain or to rave about the sexual feast they had afterwards, I wouldn't blame you if you rushed to cover your kids' ears, because those are things that we don't see or expect today.

But in Ephesus and Thyatira and Corinth in cities in that day and age, those things were very normal. They were as normal as paying taxes. Tolerance for sin is a very sneaky way of getting into our church.

[16 : 13] And often with sexual immorality it's very easy to go and shift the blame to the culture outside. It may be true, but we only succumb to sexual immorality because of the desires in our flesh and in our hearts.

The culture and our flesh fight together against our spirit to turn us away from God towards sin. They tell us that what is the truth is a lie and that what God has said is forbidden is permissible.

And I don't think things have changed too much in 2,000 years. When the church in Thyatira slipped on its sexual conduct, we do the same.

And don't think that because we're here inside the church and God's fellowship of believers that we're exempt, that we're immune to this. Here's some numbers. Statistically, about 88% of singles in developed countries engage in premarital sex.

In that church, in the church, that number drops to 80%. 80. 70% of men 18 to 35 watch pornography regularly.

[17 : 35] That's the kind of statistic that seeps into the church. Studies have shown that 50% of pastors struggle with pornography. Something is wrong with our church, with the way we view God, when 40% of women going for abortions in the United States say that they're Christians, that they have a faith in God.

Studies show that one in four marriages within the church experience domestic and sexual violence. And increasingly, more and more people in the church begin to teach that homosexuality is a part of God's will for marriage, family, and sex.

In the church then, in the church now, sexual conduct is an issue. In 1 Corinthians 5, we see Paul berating the church for celebrating incest in its midst.

They brought into the lie that freedom from sin meant they could do whatever they want. Now, don't look at Corinth and think that we're any better. Because pornography is as much a sin as incest is.

Homosexual relations are sin as much as adultery is sin. And in God's eyes, emotional and sexual abuse are as much a sin as pedophilia.

[19 : 01] As I grow and I'm walking on this journey, I'm made more aware of how sinful and how broken I am. I don't have to look back very far to see a time when I was in a pit.

On one side, pornography, on the other side, casual sex. It's not too many years ago that I emotionally abused my girlfriends to satisfy my sexual desires.

I see every day how much my thoughts and my actions are torn apart by slavery to the flesh.

I see it's only by grace that I'm able to pursue holiness and purity. The truth is that our sinful nature uses sex to make slaves of us.

It wraps us in guilt and shame and it blinds us to a multitude of other things. It makes us, as Peter wrote, ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

[20 : 15] The problem, however, is not with sex. Without a tire in much of the ancient world, the blame was shifted to livelihood. Sex is only a problem because we need to live.

We need to eat and feed our families. If we're not in these guilds and taking part in these things, how are we going to tithe and support the church? Do we do the same in Hong Kong?

Do we compromise our faith for our livelihood? I get to spend a lot of time around HKU. Students at Hong Kong University are incredibly pragmatic.

They know that to get good grades, they need to study and they will study all day and all night. And they'll do that all the way through the semester and then they'll get to where exams are coming, which is going to be in a couple of weeks.

And then they have Super Pass season. Super Pass is a phenomenon at Hong Kong University where there are different celebrations and different things that they do to, you know, get better exam grades.

[21 : 20] It usually involves sticking banners on your door. Sometimes it involves a pig and they have this ceremony where they get this roast pig and you get a big knife and you cut it and each person has a go cutting it and the idea is that if you cut all the way through the pig that you'll Super Pass your exams, that you'll be blessed and you'll get at least a 3.0 on your GPA.

Now, I haven't met anyone who calls this a religious ceremony but to me it smells a lot like idolatry. Like saying that this pig and my ability to cut through it has an effect on how I'm going to do my exams.

It has more effect on my exams than God. I think that we misplace our trust all the time and it's not just the students. I think we're all guilty of that.

We do it in our feng shui to get the flow of money to our desks. You know, we do it when we throw Joss papers at wishing trees. We do it when we go under the bridge so that, you know, our wives can be blessed so they can have healthy children.

You know, we do it when we put hope in what the horoscope says. When we buy a little money cat to stick in our doorway. When we think about the dates that we're getting married on or the colors that we're going to wear.

[22 : 38] I think without thinking we make idols of just about anything. We trust these things, these people, these rituals more than we trust God.

And we don't have to say it out loud because our actions do that for us. They say that God isn't enough, that I need these things to trust in because they're just going to be that little extra that God can't do.

What I'm saying is that the problem isn't with our livelihoods. It isn't with these rituals. It's not with sex. It's not with slipping morals. It's not our carnal desires with us.

The problem's in our hearts. In our hearts, we don't trust and honor God. It was a case in Thyatira. The issue wasn't sex.

It wasn't tolerating sin or false teachers. It was that their hearts were not on God. I know that's true. My problem wasn't sex.

[23 : 39] My problem was that my heart would rather serve my flesh than it would serve God. And Paul captures this. I love it in Romans 1 because he says, although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him.

They became futile in their thinking. Their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. They exchanged the glory of an immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, animals, and creeping things.

And so here we stand with the Thyatira in church. Their sexual immorality, their idol worship. And God comes before them.

At the beginning it says that He has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze. It's not a nice image. It's not Jesus with white hair and white robes. Jesus is here and He means business.

His burning eyes say that He sees and He searches their minds and their hearts and He knows the deepest part of their souls. And His feet like burnished bronze are not gentle.

[24 : 49] They're not feet for massaging. These are crushing feet and they're shining and reflecting. It's not enough that God sees our sin. He wants to show it to us. Of the letters that we see so far, the language of judgment isn't as strong as we see here in Thyatira.

Unlike others, there's no ifs. Or, you know, maybes or warnings or if you repent. He says that I gave Jezebel time to repent but she refuses and behold, watch what I'm going to do.

I will throw her onto a sickbed. What was once her den of pleasure is going to become a morgue. I'm going to kill her children. I'm going to punish those who follow her. Jezebel's judgment is not optional.

She had a chance to repent. That judgment is coming. And Jesus is coming with His fiery eyes and His bronze boots. But it's not all trouble.

He tells others that, you know, if you do not repent, I'll throw you in tribulation. So if you do repent, that won't happen to you. There's still a chance to return to Jesus.

[25 : 57] It says at the end of the letter that a holy and righteous one, Jesus, is going to be given a bronze rod and He will rule with that rod. The word rule here is a lot like shepherding, but instead of a wooden staff, it's an iron rod and what's left in its wake is broken pots.

What about those who stay away? What about those who have kept themselves pure? Jesus says that I don't lay on you any other burden. I do not lay on you any other burden, which makes me wonder what is the burden they already have?

The burden of living in a church that is being rotten from the inside by sexual immorality, the burden of watching those that they love punished for their sinfulness.

The challenge seems clear that God is calling them to call their friends, to call their members, their family in the church to repentance. Is that you?

I mean, I wonder if, and I struggle with this, but asking and calling people to repentance. It's not easy to go to your friends and say, dude, that's messed up.

[27 : 10] You know, you need to get right with God. That is going to destroy your life. But I wonder if, as a church, are we doing that in our community groups, with our friends? He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

That's verse 29. It's not long after this letter, actually, less than 100 years after this letter was written, that there was no sign of a church ever having existed in Thyatira.

We don't know what happened to the church. I have nothing to say how they met their end, but if Jezebel's story is anything to go by, that wasn't a pretty ending. And I imagine a conversation happening in a nearby town.

Hey, do you remember Lydia's church? Lydia? Yeah, yeah, you know, the rich lady from Thyatira. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I remember her.

Whatever happened to that church? Whatever happened to those people? Because, you know, those guys, they knew how to love. They knew what faithfulness was about. Yeah, but, you know, I always felt something off whenever I hung out with them.

[28 : 22] I wonder if God saw that too. In verse 23, it says, all the churches will know that I am He who searches minds and hearts. It's not enough that they had these good things, that they had love and faithfulness, that they persevered, because God is looking at their hearts.

He's looking at your hearts, because out of the heart, because the heart is a seat for the soul. It's where worship comes from. It's where sin comes from.

And what God wants to see out of our hearts is repentance. I think for us today, we can fall into one of four categories. Either we're outside the church.

We're not part of this fellowship of believers. Or we could be the Jezebel in the church, tearing people away from God's law, lying to them and saying that God has no authority to speak into these areas of our lives.

Third, we could be the people who are deceived, who forget what they've been taught and follow this new teaching, mixing our faith with faith in something else, worshiping God, but mostly trusting in something else.

[29 : 35] Or, we could be the innocent ones. We don't have idolatry in our hearts, but we tolerate the intolerable in others. and we avoid sin, but by tolerating the sin in others, are also guilty.

The truth is about these people and about us is that no one is righteous, that we are all guilty, that we can't keep his works, that we all deserve judgment, that we deserve the sickbed, the iron rod.

We deserve to be smashed like that broken pottery. Who can stand before God? Who can save us?

The passage says that we are judged according to our actions. Well, clearly, love and faith and perseverance aren't the actions that will judge us.

I think what God is looking for is repentance. The only way that we can be saved is through Jesus and the only way that we see Jesus is by repenting, by turning away from our sin, from our faith in other things, from our sexual immorality and turning to Jesus.

[30 : 54] I think repentance is key because it says that Jezebel was given time to repent, but she didn't. I think that every moment that we are alive is a moment of grace.

It's a moment that God has given us to repent. And every moment we have is a moment of grace that God gives us to repent.

In Isaiah chapter 30, we see a picture of this repentance, of God's desire for our repentance. That's where the imagery of these broken pots comes from. We see people who have turned away from God and God is saying that they're preaching illusions as prophecy and he says that because of their perverseness that God's judgment is coming.

It says in the passage that these pots, these clay pots will be smashed and broken. They'll be smashed and broken to the point where not a single piece can carry a drop of water.

And he calls him to repent and he says, I long to be gracious to you. I want to show you my mercy. I'm pulling you. I want your heart to turn away from your sin, from your desires and to face me, to look at me.

[32 : 12] I think repentance isn't easy. I've been reading the Bible in French so I grew up speaking French in a French school but I thought if I read it in French then I wouldn't skip over the passages that I thought I knew.

And as I was reading Mark where we'd see repentance it says changement radical. It says that there's going to be a radical change. When Jesus is preaching he says change radically because the kingdom of God is coming.

It's not a course adjustment. It's not tuning a strain that's a little bit off. It's standing up and turning away completely. You know, for me it wasn't enough to put away the emotional abuse from our relationships and think, okay, that's just a little bit of adjustment.

No. It meant changing radically the way I engaged my relationships and what I did with my body with my heart. One of the things I've been convicted of is that I'm slow to repent.

That I would rather wallow in my sin because I'm too proud to say that I'm a sinner. That I'm too proud to say that I need Jesus. Because repentance is costly. It may cost us embarrassment.

- [33 : 25] It may hurt relationships around us. Turning away from our sin and turning to God could cost us our homes, our jobs, our families. But I think it's worth it.
- I think it's worth it because Jesus died on the cross. Because in repentance and turning to Christ and turning to his cross, we win Jesus. We win his righteousness.
- We put our faith in one that will never fail. Not in a pig, not in humans, not in a book of the future.
- And we place ourselves in front of someone who will satisfy us completely. That will satisfy us more than money or sex, more than family or work or good grades.
- repentance. Repentance turns us and puts us before one who has the power to forgive sins. One has the power to secure our eternity with God by defeating death and defeating Satan.
- [34 : 29] I think repentance is good news because repentance is not baseless but it's in a gospel that's already complete. The gospel says that like the church in Thyatira, that we are broken and rotten.
- In fact, we're more sinful than we probably think we are. The gospel says that there's judgment coming, that we can't escape. The gospel says that when we repent that Jesus forgives us.
- Or the gospel also says that forgiveness isn't free. It isn't cheap. It's not a pat on the back and away you go. There's still an iron rod.
- There's still pots to be smashed. And that's what we see on the cross. We see the punishment for our rebellion against God.
- For tolerating sin. For preaching on truth. For trusting idols instead of Him. Because Jesus takes that on the cross for us. Jesus is a shepherd with the iron staff.
- [35 : 36] But Jesus, for those who believe, is also the broken pottery. He was apathitira for us, for our community groups, for me.
- Jesus, the shepherd with the iron staff, is also the broken pottery. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father God, I confess that we love sin more than we love you.
- That our hearts are rebellious. Father, forgive us. Protect us from the lies that pull us away from you. Show us where we need to repent.
- show us the people that we should call out for and call them to repentance and their brothers and sisters in the church. Show us the cross.
- Show us how you are the God that took our punishment for us. That you are the broken pot. Father, show us that help us to believe that your holy love is big enough.
- [37 : 05] That your holiness, your holy wrath against our sin is taken by Christ. Father, help us to be people who are more aware of our sin and see how beautiful you are.
- Lord, help us to repent and to turn away from the desires of our hearts and the lies of the world into you. Father, I thank you and I rejoice that you have saved me, that you have saved us, that we have today people who have done that and we get to see their baptism, seeing them dying to sin and coming alive in you.
- Jesus, we love you and it's your holy and precious name that we pray. Amen.