

## ***The Letter to Thyatira: Immorality, Highway to the Grave*<sup>1</sup>**

Third Sunday in Lent (YrB)

[Psalm 7:8-10, 17; 1 Kings 16:29–33; Revelation 2:18–29; Matthew 25:31–46]

March 7, 2021

Rev. Frank C. Ruffatto

Redeemer Lutheran Church – Charleston, WV

### **POINTS TO PONDER**

- 1. Jesus, at His first appearing, came to ‘seek and to save the lost.’ (cf. Luke 19:10) because ‘God so loved the world.’ (cf. John 3:16) What is the purpose of His final appearing as alluded to in this message? (cf. Revelation 2:18, 23)**
- 2. How is your congregation like/unlike the one addressed in this letter, Thyatira?**
- 3. How do we “hold on to what [we] have until [Jesus] comes”? (cf. Revelation 2:23)**
- 4. From where (or whom) do the gifts of good works come? How is faith strengthened as we await Jesus’ final appearing?**

---

**Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.**

**Let us Pray:** O Lord Jesus, Star of the Morning, make us deaf to the attractions of this world and let us hear only Your calling to a holy life of faith. May we remain close to the cross where Your death bought us from sin and made us Your children. May we always find refuge in the empty tomb where Satan was defeated, and Your victory was made ours forever. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.

This is one hardworking congregation, not only in church work but also in the market, factory, and workshop! After serving you all these years, I must admit that I am impressed. The purple fabric you make, and sell is as fine as any that can be found in the Roman Empire. You are solid citizens. You even take time away from work to attend church, though it costs you money. What character!

I know all this because I am Aster. I have been your angel for the past thirty years or so. Aster means “star,” so my name reminds you of my master, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Morning Star.

His coming, past and future, signals a bright new day with light that chases away the darkness of ignorance, fear, and guilt. Jesus is the light of the world. His Word brings true enlightenment, the knowledge of salvation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Worship & Sermon resources for this series: *Revelation for Lent*, Donald H. Neidigk, (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 2004)

When He died on the cross for the sins of the world, darkness covered the earth. Yet at that moment, the light of salvation dawned on the whole human race. I am not the light; I reflect His light while I serve as your guardian and bring you God's message. Jesus is the true light.

Jesus has assigned me to your congregation. Although you do not see much of me, this is my church too. And being your angel is becoming more difficult as the church continues to grow. Instead of leaving the sinful ways of the world behind, some Christians bring the world into the church. That troubles Jesus, as it does the apostle John, who suffers as a prisoner for the faith on the island of Patmos.

Together they have given me a special letter to share with you. This message is not a suggestion for improvement. It is a life-and-death message from the divine Son of God **“whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.”**<sup>2</sup> My superior and yours, the King of kings and Lord of lords, wants you to know that He is the one to whom all humanity will give account. And He will be heard.

But do not be afraid! Be assured that though He is Lord of heaven and earth, Jesus loves you, and through faith, He is pleased with you. All your sins are washed away. You are makers of purple cloth, but in Holy Baptism, all of you are clothed in the white robes of righteousness.

God is pleased with you today. He has accepted you because of the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. Your congregation is known throughout Asia for your good deeds, your love of God and neighbor, your firm adherence to the faith of the apostles. Indeed, **“you are now doing more than you did at first.”**<sup>3</sup> This may be true, but it is more difficult than ever to be a Christian in Thyatira.

The threat to godliness that you face is different than the challenges placed before your fellow believers in Smyrna, Ephesus, and other cities. They are assaulted daily by the emperor cult, the extravagances of wealth, the arrogance of those steeped in philosophy. But Thyatira is a small town of working people – craftspeople and merchants.

There are no temples to Rome or Caesar to contend with in Thyatira, only the usual shrines to Artemis and Apollo. High culture and religious zeal have not put Thyatira on the map; rather, it is the water in your rivers, which is perfect for dying cloth, and the quality of your products, which are sought-after by the rich.

Although lacking in cultural amenities, Thyatira has its share of temptations. The devil has not left you alone because yours is a small town. Perhaps it is even harder to be a faithful Christian here. Being small means each of you knows everyone else's business intimately, intensifying the pressure to conform.

---

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 2:18

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 2:19

This raises the matter of your craft guilds. If you make and sell a product, such as the lovely purple cloth for which Thyatira is famous, you are expected to be a member of the guild. If you do not join, your business suffers. People will not buy cloth from you. Neighbors will not talk to you. To survive economically, it is almost essential to join a guild. But as you have discovered, joining a guild can place a Christian in some awkward situations. Membership in a craft guild is more than showing up at the meetings and discussing quality control, new technologies, and better marketing strategies.

Part of the meeting involves a meal in which everyone eats meat sacrificed to Apollo or Artemis. And several times a year, guild members participate in pagan festivals – festivals that can involve ritual sex. When you said yes to Christ, you also said no to such shameful things. But joining the guild is the key to prosperity. Stay out and your business might die.

Maybe some of you remember Lydia, a former member of your community, a Gentile like yourselves but also a God-fearing woman. She would not “pay her dues,” so to speak. As a dealer in purple fabric like many of you, she chose to move to Philippi to remain in business. Since you last saw her, she has become a baptized Christian.

Upon hearing Paul preach the Good News of Jesus’ suffering and death for her sins and His resurrection from the dead, God opened Lydia’s heart to believe. She became so dedicated to Christ that the first meeting place of the church at Philippi was in her home. God has richly blessed faithful Lydia. Consider her example of faithfulness and imitate it.

Some of you continue to struggle with your decision. It would be so easy to compromise and join the craft guild. “Those gods they worship aren’t really gods,” you might reason, “so what difference does it make if I eat a little sacrificial meat?” That is what Jezebel is trying to tell you, that compromising woman you have in the congregation. “Jezebel” is not her real name, of course, but you know the person of whom I am speaking. The original Jezebel, the namesake of the woman in your congregation, was Ahab’s wife. She was the Baal-worshipping daughter of the king of Tyre and Sidon. Her goal in life was to destroy Israel’s faith in Yahweh. Jezebel invited the prophets of Baal to eat at the king’s table. Jezebel slaughtered hundreds of Yahweh’s prophets. Jezebel brought false charges against Naboth so he would be killed, and she could seize his vineyard as a gift for her husband.

Because of Jezebel’s evil influence, all the members of the royal family died violent deaths – her husband, Ahab; her sons; and all who might have a claim to Israel’s throne. When they were all dead, Jezebel tried to seduce the new king of Israel, Jehu. With painted eyes and a fancy hairdo, she appeared in a tower window of the palace, welcoming Jehu to her bed. He was not impressed. Instead, Jehu called to her servants, “If

you are on my side, throw her down.” They did. Her body was left unburied and was eaten by dogs.<sup>4</sup>

All the ugliness of Jezebel’s story could become the story of this church at Thyatira if you listen to this woman, if you begin compromising, if you believe you can serve Jesus and the false gods of your neighbors as well, if you believe you can enjoy the forgiveness of sins and continue to indulge in a promiscuous lifestyle. Make no mistake, you cannot.

Some of you might think your behavior and beliefs are a private matter. You might think no one else will notice or be affected. But Holy Scripture says: **“None of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone.”**<sup>5</sup> All you do and say is observed and evaluated by others and has an impact on their lives. Ahab’s entire family died because of the evil he allowed into his home through Jezebel. And Jesus says to you, **“I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways... I will strike her children dead.”**<sup>6</sup>

Jesus does not mean physical death; He means spiritual death. He means a journey to the grim doors of hell because the heart is calloused by false doctrine and immoral behavior. This journey involves a growing darkness of mind and heart, and infection with fear and guilt, which eat away at the soul. Before you come to hell, it comes to you. Worse, if you continue this spiritual journey, others – friends and family who love and trust you – will imitate what you do and bring on themselves the same fate.

Although you think your actions are done in secret, they never are. The one who has **“eyes like blazing fire”**<sup>7</sup> always knows. The Son of God who is coming in judgment says, **“I am He who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.”**<sup>8</sup>

To this point, your deeds have been the deeds of faith, love, service, and perseverance as my master, Jesus, said at the beginning of my message to you. These deeds of love have been given to you by the Holy Spirit, who strengthens your faith through God’s Word and the Sacraments. Through these means of grace, God keeps you steadfast in the one true faith.

Continue in this faith and dedication. **“Hold on to what you have until I come,”**<sup>9</sup> says your Lord. He will help you. Your suffering will last only a little while. Remember this when you feel the temptation to compromise. You have needs, but Jesus knows all about them and still cares for you. He promised you in the Sermon on the Mount: **“Seek first**

---

<sup>4</sup> cf. 2 Kings 9:30-37

<sup>5</sup> Romans 14:7

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 2:22-23

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 2:18

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 2:23

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 2:23

**[God's] kingdom and His righteousness and all these things [all that you need] will be given to you as well.”<sup>10</sup>**

People of Thyatira, you have entrusted Jesus with your eternal soul, your ultimate destiny. You have believed that He died for you and lives again, forgiving all your sins and earning for you a place in heaven. If you trust Jesus for all this, can you not then trust Him to meet your daily needs?

The apostle Paul has written: **“He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”<sup>11</sup>**

It may look as if your needs will not be met without compromising your faith and values, but that is Jezebel's lie. Look where listening to her got Ahab and his family. Jesus wants nothing but good for you, and as you remain in Him by faith, you will experience His goodness in abundance.

He says: **“To him who overcomes and does My will to the end, I will give authority over the nations.”<sup>12</sup>** Why submit to the compromising authority of some Jezebel or any other influence that would rob you of a peaceful conscience and enslave you? You have the promise of Jesus that you will reign with Him in heaven. Why “give in” when you can “go up” and spend eternity with Jesus, the bright morning star?

Well, if I stay here much longer, you might start thinking of me as the “star” attraction. But I am merely your angel, Aster. Only Jesus, the Morning Star, will take you safely past all the threatening Jezebels to the Promised Land where He is king and royal purple is not what you sell but what you wear. Amen.

**“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”<sup>13</sup>**

---

<sup>10</sup> cf. Matthew 6:33

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:32

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 2:26

<sup>13</sup> Romans 15:13