

“The Necessity of a Holy Life”
Revelation 2:18-29
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Text Comment

- v.18 Once again the letter begins with an identification of Jesus Christ drawn from the vision of chapter 1. The majesty of the Lord Christ prepares the way for his stern words in vv. 22 and 23. The chief god of Thyatira was Apollo, the son of Zeus. That perhaps explains why Jesus is here called the Son of God, i.e. he is the *true* Son of the *Living* God.

Thyatira was a prosperous manufacturing and trading town but was otherwise a lesser place than the other towns to which the letters of Rev. 2 and 3 were sent. It was not a seat of government, nor was it a center of imperial worship. One scholar comments: “The longest and the most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable of the cities.” [Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 106] We can take some comfort from that, those of us who live in Tacoma and not New York or even Seattle. The Lord knows us and cares about us as well! We know there were a number of trade guilds or business associations in Thyatira. Mentioned in inscriptions from the period are woolworkers, linen-workers, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, and so on. [Mounts, 101] Lydia, the first of Paul’s converts in Philippi, was from Thyatira, perhaps was the Philippi representative of a Purple Cloth guild from her home town. [Caird, 43] In any case, most people involved in the economic activity of Thyatira would have belonged to one or another of these guilds or trade associations.

What is important about that is that these guilds regularly held feasts that were religious in nature – each guild had its patron god or goddess and the worship of this figure would have been part of the feast – and this created the problem for Christians. Such meals often ended in sexually licentious behavior and that posed a second problem. Could Christians participate in such occasions or did they have to remain perpetual outsiders, cut off from the economic life and prosperity of the city? As we have already seen, Christians gave different answers to those questions. The church in Ephesus had apparently remained opposed to any such compromise; one party in the church in Pergamum had advocated full participation; and in Thyatira there were also those advocating the participation of Christians in these pagan feasts. The temptation was great because in a society where participation in certain practices was held to be a criterion for acceptance and full membership in the community the Christian faced isolation and economic hardship if he refused to take part.

- v.19 The letter opens with effusive praise for the Thyatiran believers. This is a community that is continuing to grow in Christian virtue and usefulness.
- v.20 The woman’s name was not Jezebel, of course; that name is John’s description of her life and teaching, Jezebel being the pagan queen of Israel, the wife of King Ahab, who did so

much to encourage idolatry and other pagan practices in Israel. This woman, who apparently was a prominent member of the church in Thyatira, laid claim to some sort of prophetic authority and had led other people in the church to embrace her views, views that were apparently quite like if not identical to those of the Nicolaitans mentioned in the previous letter. What minor differences there may have been, they were both libertine movements advocating various forms of compromise with the world.

The fact that the church's sin was *to tolerate* this woman suggests that many, perhaps most in the church did not agree with her or follow her teaching, but they refused to deal with her. They were unlike the Ephesians who did not tolerate false teachers and drove them out of the church. It was John's role to play Elijah to this Jezebel and to call the people back to undivided loyalty to the Lord.

- v.21 Perhaps John himself had rebuked this woman on one occasion and pointed out the error of her teaching, but, if so, that rebuke had made no impression on her. The fact that punishment does not *immediately* overtake sinners is constantly misunderstood by them to mean that it will *never* overtake them. [Trench, 150]
- v.23 Sickness and death are the punishments the Lord threatens to visit upon this Jezebel and her followers.

Verse 23 is the middle sentence in the middle letter of the seven letters and it is the only sentence in the seven letters that refers to all the churches at once, apart from the phrase "what the Spirit says to the churches" at the end of each letter. That is no accident surely. *The prospect of divine judgment is the central theme of these letters.*

- v.24 John is probably speaking ironically. This woman no doubt claimed to introduce her followers into the deep things of God, but she was, in fact, a pawn of Satan. But it is also possible that she taught that a Christian had the power and the freedom to enter into Satan's lair – the pagan temple and its ceremonies – and come out again unscathed.
- v.25 The Greek can be read so that John says, "I will not impose on you any other burden *than* that you hold on to what you have until I come." That is, to hold on to the truth as it was revealed to them through the apostles and the Word of God.
- v.27 The citation is from Psalm 2 and applies to the Messiah. The Lord is saying that the authority he has been given over the nations will be shared with his followers. What that means is hard to know. That Christians will participate in Christ's judgment, that they will rule in the next world is said elsewhere in the Bible, but precisely what that means is not explained.
- v.28 In Daniel we read of the faithful shining like the stars forever and ever (12:3) and at the end of Revelation (22:6) the Lord Jesus describes himself as the "bright Morning Star."

"I will repay each of you according to your deeds." Christians are not used to hearing the Lord say that to them. I hazard the guess that few people in Presbyterian Church in America

congregations hear that message with any kind of regularity if at all. The Gospel is a message about the forgiveness of sins, of salvation as a free gift, of our righteousness before God being not our own righteousness but Christ's righteousness reckoned to us when we trust in him. Christians have cut their teeth on the great *solas* of the Reformation: our salvation is *sola gratia*, by grace or gift alone, *sola fide*, by faith alone; *solo Christo*, by Christ alone. That these truths are the teaching of Holy Scripture no honest mind can deny. "We are justified by faith not by works," said the Apostle Paul. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord," Paul also said. "*He* will save his people from their sins," said the angel to Joseph about the baby boy to be born. I could multiply texts to the same point as you well know.

But here the Lord addresses his church and says to them that they must obey; they must turn away from their sins and keep his commandments; they must practice deeds of faith and love *or else*. If they do not, the Lord says, I will take note of it and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

In a sermon on this text in evangelical churches nowadays, including Reformed, Presbyterian evangelical churches, one or two things would be likely done by the minister. He would either find something else in this letter to talk about – say, the danger of false teaching or the importance of holding on to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints – (that is, the message about the Lord repaying his church according to their deeds would lie unmentioned on the page). There is a noble tradition of doing just this. I have on my shelf a sermon on this text by no one less than Robert Murray McCheyne, and he pays attention to virtually every line of the letter except this line: I will repay each person according to his deeds. Or, if the preacher doesn't ignore the statement he would qualify it by reminding his congregation that the Lord's remark there in v. 23 certainly did not set aside the Bible's doctrines of salvation by grace or justification by faith alone. And the result would very often be that the congregation would not be hit between the eyes with the statement at the end of v. 23 the way John intended the congregation in Thyatira to be.

And there is a very natural reason for this tendency to pay inadequate attention to such a statement as we have here in v. 23. Ministers fear that attention paid to their obligations and duties and the necessity of their obedience will distract Christians from the way of faith in Christ. They will begin to look to themselves instead of looking to Jesus Christ, to their obedience instead of his. And that is a very real danger. Most thoughtful Christians have found themselves making that mistake times without number. The problem with this, however, is that the contrary danger, the danger of failing to take seriously the necessity of godliness and obedience is also very real. We are often told that we tend to slip into a mode of living that resembles "works righteousness." That is the term used to describe the attitude of someone who seems to feel that he or she needs to earn God's approval or who seems to depend upon his or her own faithfulness, his or her own effort to live a godly life. They have left off trusting the Lord and are looking instead to themselves. An error indeed. But we are much less likely to be warned against becoming a person who does not seem to appreciate that he or she must face the judgment of God or does not seem to be reckoning with the fact that Christ will repay each one according to his or her deeds.

I think this is a very perceptive comment of Archbishop Trench [153]:

“It is one of the gravest mischiefs which Rome has bequeathed to us, that in a reaction and protest, itself absolutely necessary, against the false emphasis which she puts on works, unduly thrusting them in to share with Christ’s merits in our justification, we often shrink from placing upon them the true [emphasis]; being as they are, to speak with St. Bernard, the ‘via regni,’ [the way of the kingdom] however little they may be the ‘causa regnandi’[the cause of belonging to the kingdom]...

It is an old problem. Martin Luther said that in his day, if ministers taught in sermon the necessity of a godly and honest life, some men by and by attempted to build their own ladders to heaven, but that if ministers taught that salvation consisted not in our works or life, but in the gift of God, some men took occasion [from that] to be slow to good works and to live a dishonest life. That is, Luther was saying it was possible to make equally serious, equally fatal mistakes in either direction. There were men in Luther’s day, in other words, who derived from the nature of the gospel the very same conclusions taught by Jezebel in Thyatira. [Cited in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* in *The Works of Thomas Boston*, vii, 236]

This statement about Christ repaying each according to his deeds – *a statement addressed to a congregation of Christians!* – is, after all, the climactic utterance of the letter *and of all seven letters* placed, as it is, right in the center. What comes before it leads up to it and what comes after it looks back to it. It is, as it were, the thematic summary of all the letters taken together. And, what is more, this is the introduction to a theme that will receive a great deal of emphasis in the book: viz. the necessity of a holy life and the judgment of the deeds of believers and unbelievers alike.

“Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, *for their deeds will follow them.*’” [14:13]

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.” [19:7-8]

“The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.” [22:13]

“Behold I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.” [22:12]

The book of Revelation, to be sure, is full of the grace of God and the salvation of Jesus Christ that is ours by faith; but that notwithstanding, God’s people are told again and again to mind their lives, to do the deeds of godliness, and to expect that they will be judged according to what they have done. And, of course, there is nothing in Revelation that can’t be found in plenty of places elsewhere in the Bible.

It was Jesus who said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” [Matt. 7:21]

It was John who said, “...a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”

It was Paul who said, “So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” And, again, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

It was Peter who said, “Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” [1 Pet. 1:17]

And, as any regular reader of the Bible knows, there are many such statements. Even Christians must face the judgment of the Lord. Their lives too will be examined and judged. Obedience and faithful living are not merely the Bible’s suggestions or recommendations, but an absolute necessity. The salvation that God gives us as a free gift in Jesus Christ must produce a godly life of faith and love. It must. The latter is the proof of the former. And, what is more, within the class of real Christians distinctions will be made by a God of perfect justice.

As important as it is for me as your minister constantly to remind you that you cannot save yourselves, that you must look to Jesus Christ and count on what he has done for you on the cross; so important is it for me to remind you that as a believer in Jesus *you must obey and serve him.*

Here, in this letter, the Lord distinguished the true and the false among his people *according to what they were doing, how they were living.* He distinguished the saved from the lost, not by whether they confessed Jesus Christ as their savior – they all did that – but by their deeds. The choice, the alternative is starkly put: either the life of v. 19 – deeds of love and faith and service and perseverance – or the life of v. 20 – compromise with the unbelieving world and its way of life. The society in Thyatira, as our society today, is entirely accepting of the slack, compromising Christian. They do not offend the world. But the Lord Christ is not accepting of them. That is the point!

As I have told you before, because of the OT prophets’ opposition to the ritualism that so tempted and bedeviled the life of ancient Israel and the Apostle Paul’s titanic confrontation with the moral legalism of the Judaism of his day and then the legalism of some sections of Jewish Christianity, *we tend to worry most about legalism.* Much of Christian preaching is directed against a legalistic spirit that is felt to lurk in the hearts of all men and is thought as well to tempt the heart of every Christian. There is some truth to this, I grant you.

But the great danger in our time is not legalism. You and I have hardly ever met a true legalist, someone who is actually counting up his merits and demerits and weighing the one against the other in hopes of earning his way into heaven. Nor is the danger ritualism, the notion that by going to church and doing the church thing God will approve of us. That is not what most people

think today and these are not the great temptations of Christian life today. The temptation and the danger are rather antinomianism: the view that it doesn't really matter whether or not you keep God's law, obey his will, serve him as he has commanded, and persevere in a holy life however much pain and effort may be required. "Anti-nomos:" against the law, or better, against the idea that you have to keep the law.

The remarkably perceptive John Duncan, the famous "Rabbi" Duncan of 19th century Scottish Presbyterianism once wrote:

"I suspect that, after all, there is only one heresy, and that is Antinomianism, [the sinner's quarrel with the authority of God.]" [*Colloquia Peripatetica*, 70-71]

Actually there is in antinomianism a kind of legalism, but legalism on the cheap. The antinomian doesn't count up his merits; he doesn't think he has to. He doesn't stay up nights wondering if his life is good enough for God. He doesn't think God really cares that much about how he lives his life. He doesn't have to count his merits. *Whatever his life, it will be good enough.* As the 19th century German poet and critic Heinrich Heine put it, expressing the antinomian spirit for all time: "Of course God will forgive me; that is his job." "God is kind and would never punish me. I wish I lived a better life, true enough; but I don't worry about long-term consequences. I don't have to do that. When push comes to shove, a kind, generous God as we all know God to be won't punish me." The genuine legalist at least worries that he must accomplish something or he may fail to win the prize. The antinomian thinks the prize is a foregone conclusion.

And that antinomian spirit is deeply rooted in the human heart. It was the Devil's first temptation in Eden: "you surely shall not die." And because it is so deeply rooted in the human heart it has always tempted Christians. Antinomians in the church, however, must have an argument, something that will appeal to Christians. Here in Thyatira the argument may have been based on Paul's assertion in 1 Cor. 8:4: "We know that an idol is nothing..." Well, if it is nothing then what harm can come from eating food that has been offered to nothing.

The argument we are much more likely to succumb to today takes the form Paul anticipated in Romans 6:1. We have been, in the words of one old writer, "Christ-ed" and "God-ed." [*Colloquia Peripatetica*, 29] Our place in heaven has been assured by no one and nothing less than the Son of God and the grace of God. Compared to those mighty considerations whether or not we live well or poorly as Christians can matter very little. Now, they go on to say, Christians should definitely live godly lives. No one denies this. Our love for God should motivate us to live lives that are pleasing to him. Everyone says that: it is certainly better to be holy, loving, and to be serving both God and other people. But, as Samuel Rutherford put it, "Antinomians make all duties a matter of courtesy." That is, we don't *have* to do this, but we are being nice to God by doing it.

But if you allow that it not necessary to be the people described in v. 19 of the letter to the church in Thyatira, you have not only removed one of the principle motivations for godliness provided in Holy Scripture, but you have denied a fundamental fact of God's relationship with his people. Even our heavenly Father, even our Savior, even our Friend, *remains our Judge.* You

have also defamed the Lord Jesus, a point the Bible makes many times. As the Puritan William Woodward put it:

“The garments of Christ’s righteousness must not be made a cloak for sin.” [E. Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, 208]

And that is what they were, in fact, doing in Thyatira and what many Christians are doing today. They are trusting Christ’s cross to purify them of the contamination they receive by making their peace with the world and compromising with its ethics and its way of life. They were using Christ’s terrible death for our sin as an excuse for their sinning still more. But Jesus didn’t suffer and die to make it possible for you to live a worldly life with no consequences, to enjoy your sins and your salvation too. Christ died to make you holy; God’s grace appeared to teach us to say “No!” to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age. Christ, Paul says, gave himself for us to purify for himself a people that are his very own, *eager* to do what is good.” [Titus 2:11-14]

I want you all to feel the force of this. Persevering in faith, love, and good deeds for these Christians meant real financial loss. It meant that they would inevitably be cut off from much of the hope of success in their society. It meant some significant measure of ostracism. But Jesus didn’t pull his punch because of the painful sacrifice that holiness of life would require of his people. He looked them in the eye and said, “I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” Don’t suppose, he was saying, that it makes no great difference whether you obey me, serve me, and make the necessary sacrifices that loyalty to me may require of you. It makes all the difference in the world! The day is coming when everyone will know this!

And, lest we take comfort from some measure of outward conformity, satisfy ourselves because we are able to practice the Christian life to the satisfaction of other Christians, hear the Lord say that *he searches hearts and minds*. The Lord knows our lives down to their bottom. He knows our motives, our attitudes, our thoughts about him and about others. He knows whether our faith and love are real obedience to him or simply an outward display to keep our reputation intact. He knows what we really think and how we really live when our lives are measured by what they are inside and down deep, the parts of ourselves we so successfully hide from others and often from ourselves.

So what does a Christian man or woman do who takes to heart this divine promise to repay each according to his or her deeds? I will tell you. He thinks about his life. He examines himself. He insists on being ruthlessly honest with himself about himself. He genuinely desires to see himself as Christ sees him who searches the heart. He appreciates that self-delusion is all too possible. And then he takes steps to put on godliness in the fear of the Lord. And he keeps doing so, day after day, week after week, year after year, until his sun is set and his day is done. All along the way he loves the Lord Jesus for the free gift of salvation and all along the way he obeys the Lord Christ in the prospect of the judgment day. That is what he does; that is what she does; that and nothing else.