

Jezebel

In the name of the Son of God, who has eyes like fire and feet like burnished bronze, dear friends in Christ: Last week, in this series on the letters to the churches of Asia, we heard what the Lord Jesus had to say to the Christian congregation at Pergamum. In their favor, the Lord gave them high marks for their steadfast courage in the face of violent persecution. Even under severe threats of punishment, they refused to renounce their faith in the Lord. Some of them were martyred, choosing death rather than deny Jesus and live. These received the victor's crown of life and served as faithful examples for their fellows – as they do for all of us.

But there were problems. Some members of the church had fallen under the influence of two pernicious false teachings. Jesus calls them “the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans”. These two errors worked together to teach that God's Law does not have to be obeyed, that sin is no longer a problem, and that from a Christian point of view it is perfectly fine to engage in immoral behavior. Thus, some people were despising the cross of Christ and the Lord who suffered so much to save them *from* sin –not to give them a license to continue in it. These the Lord called to repent, promising his complete forgiveness for those who would turn back to the truth of his way.

Now we go the church in Thyatira, a congregation that also suffered from having false teachings in its midst; but first a little about the city and its peculiar situation. Thyatira was about twenty miles southeast of Pergamum. It was an important trade center. It was especially known for the production of fine fabrics and a much sought after purple dye. The two went together well. Just to give you an idea, no matter where you went in the Roman world, if you said that someone was clothed in Thyatiran purple, you were saying that they were sitting in the lap of luxury and didn't mind showing it off. Business thrived at Thyatira. So much that unlike their neighbors in the last cities we've examined, the pagan citizens here didn't have much time to pay attention to their gods – I mean, who needs religion when everything is going well? There were only a few small temples in the city, and those were for fairly minor characters in the Greek pantheon. And the cult of the worship of Roman emperors that was so popular at Smyrna and Pergamum didn't catch on here at all.

Addressing the church at Thyatira, Jesus calls himself the one who has “eyes like fire and feet like burnished bronze”. His feet of burnished bronze indicate holiness, strength, and hardness – perhaps for stamping out evil. The burning eyes suggest that he is able to see into the hearts of men for purposes of judgment, and perhaps for purification. But with these eyes, the Lord is able to detect certain good points in this church. He sees them as an active congregation, translating the Gospel of grace into works of love and service. In general, the people in the Roman world were always surprised at how the Christians cared for others – especially those their society traditionally cast out: the poor, sick, old, disfigured, and physically and mentally impaired. So the loving actions of the church would have stood out even more clearly in a dog-eat-dog business town like Thyatira. Jesus commends them for their loving work, and says that these outstanding evidences of their faith had grown stronger over time.

But not all was well in the church. Jesus sharply criticizes them for tolerating in their midst a self-proclaimed prophetess whom he calls “Jezebel”. It's probably not her real name. Jezebel was a notoriously wicked queen mentioned in the Old Testament. Jesus uses her

name here much like we do when we refer to any especially evil woman as a *Jezebel* – but he also means that there’s a direct correlation in the actions of the two women.

The original Jezebel lived about 800 years before the time of Christ. She was the daughter of the king of Sidon, a small but very wealthy kingdom that neighbored the northern kingdom of Israel. The king of Israel at the time was Ahab: a politically shrewd but morally spineless man. Though he was a believer in the one true God, he was wishy-washy in his convictions. He was willing to bend whichever way the wind was blowing if it was to his advantage. Anyway, Ahab managed to secure the hand of Jezebel in marriage. For him it was a political triumph to marry the daughter of his wealthy neighbor. It allowed him to forge a strong alliance with the kingdom of Sidon, which, he thought, would guarantee a bright future of peace and prosperity for his nation.

So Jezebel became Ahab’s queen in his capital city of Samaria. The trouble was that she was an avid worshipper of the Canaanite god Baal. When she came for the wedding, she brought with her wagons full of idols of Baal and his various consorts, along with some 400 of the idols’ prophets. To please his new wife, Ahab built several temples for Baal, along with the sacred groves that were used for his unholy, and shall we say “sexually explicit” worship. Ahab even directed the placement of one the idols right in the temple of the true God in his kingdom. Naturally, official sanction of these false gods at the highest levels of authority led to widespread adoption of Canaanite religion in Israel. At first it was “both and” sort of deal. You could worship the Lord, or Baal, or both of them together if you wished. No problem. Later (and it didn’t take long), the worship of the true God was actively suppressed. Under Jezebel’s orders the prophets of the Lord were persecuted, driven out, and some were killed. Elijah was the last one, and even he had to go into hiding for several years. That’s the way it usually goes with false gods and false doctrines when they are introduced where the Lord alone is recognized and worshipped: first the adherents of false religion want a place. “Just be tolerant of us. We’re small and insignificant. We won’t bother you a bit.” Later they expect equality. “Hey, ours is a valid faith. We’re just as good as you. You don’t think you’ve got a monopoly on the truth, do you?” In the end they demand total control. “We’re in charge here. Join us, get out, or suffer the consequences.”

This was the rising threat to the church at Thyatira. They had a problem with false doctrine, but their situation was far more critical than at Pergamum. There the false teaching was held by several members of the congregation, but the leaders of the church were not teaching it. It was more like a cancer in the body. It needed to be cut out. The erring needed to be shown their errors and taught what was right – and if they refused to change, they had to be expelled from the congregation. But Thyatira had a more dangerous situation: this prophetess Jezebel was actively pushing her false teachings with an air of authority, claiming that her new insights were from God. And unfortunately, the congregation and its leaders were tolerating her and allowing her to continue unchallenged. The leaders should have known better, but were spineless like King Ahab. They were willing to put up with her false teaching for the sake of worldly peace in the church. They didn’t want to offend anyone. Meanwhile many in the congregation were soaking up her doctrines – doctrines the Lord Jesus calls “the deep things of Satan”. It’s clear what he thought of them.

The situation was critical. In response to it, the Lord says that he himself would solve the problem. He says that he had given her time to repent. Apparently some faithful Christians had confronted her with the truth, likely several times; but she remained entrenched in her errors. Therefore the Lord says he would inflict a debilitating illness on her – “cast her on a sick bed”, he says; though it’s not clear if we are to understand this as a literal physical illness or as

a spiritual form of suffering. In any case, those who committed adultery with her – that is those mature Christians who allowed themselves to be seduced by her false teachings – would also be made to suffer. And “her children”, those who were thoroughly born and raised in her deceptions and lies, the Lord says he would strike dead. Again it’s not clear if he means that they would physically fall over dead – or if he means that they would die spiritually, that is, lose the Christian faith altogether; but either way the results are the same.

From all this it’s evident that the Lord is jealously watchful of precisely what is being taught in the church that bears his name. He takes a dim view of those who claim to speak for him but come up with doctrines from their own imaginations. He will not tolerate the mixing of his truth with Satan’s lies. And his judgments don’t fall only on those who do the false teaching, but also on those who know the truth and fail to censure a false prophet in their midst, *and* on those who are led astray.

All of which speaks for the absolute need for every Christian congregation (and denomination) to judge the doctrine of its teachers in light of God’s Word, and for those who are teachers to be watchful and constructively critical of each other. This is especially difficult these days because we live in a society very much like first century Thyatira: one focused on business and pleasure, and subject to the myth of relativism – the popular notion that there is no such thing as absolute truth; or if there is, there’s no way to know it for sure. Part of it too is that very often we don’t want to bother to try to find the truth because we don’t want to have to deal with the implications. It’s easier to be wishy-washy like Ahab and just go with the flow. “Doctrine divides”, we are told, and division is bad; therefore it must be that doctrine is bad – so let’s ignore or get rid of those who insist that it is important.

And it’s true that division is bad. It’s the sad result of sin. But that’s the problem: we are all *divided* from God on account of our sin. That’s exactly why we need sound doctrine because it’s what divides truth from error – the Gospel of Jesus Christ that saves from Satan’s lies that damn. Ultimately, doctrine – the content of what is taught in the church – divides life from death. And when Jesus comes in judgment he’s going to do the dividing: those who believe in his true Gospel will live, and those who don’t will be sent to hell. So we in the church should make correct doctrine our top priority. It’s amazing to me that we would all agree that a person who goes around murdering people is a terrible sinner who should be stopped – but we don’t get nearly as worked up over a false prophet in the church who murders souls.

Most of you are old enough to remember how in the late 60s and early 70s our synod fought the so-called “Battle for the Bible”. For 20 years or so most of the faculty at the St. Louis seminary who were training our pastors believed in and taught according to the Higher Critical method of biblical interpretation. That means they denied the inerrancy of Scripture, thought most of its history is myths and legends, rejected out of hand any miracle account, and taught against such basic Christian truths as the virgin birth, the deity of God’s Son, and the resurrection of Jesus. They imagined that they were smarter and more sophisticated than poor slobbs like us who take God at his Word. They believed it was their job to lead us out of our benighted ignorance into the light of their truth – which is no truth at all, but rather the deep things of Satan. By God’s grace in ’74 the whole thing came to a head. The false teachers were exposed and the synod split. But it wasn’t a clean break. Many pastors already serving congregations had been poisoned by these false teachings. They should have left the synod, but they stayed. And for 40 years or more they’ve worked their mischief, which is why we have such a sharp division in our synod between conservative congregations like this one and some in more urban areas that are very liberal and you would never know are Lutheran churches.

But let's to bring this closer to home. The letter to the church at Thyatira speaks to each of us individually. Every one of us has the responsibility to know the truth of God's Word and to judge what is being taught in light of it so that we can recognize and reject the false prophets that the Bible says will certainly arise among us. Jesus and his apostles opposed false doctrine with sharp words when they encountered it. They didn't avoid confrontation. They argued from God's Word to show the truth. We need to be prepared to do the same – which means that we need to be steadily growing in God's Word so that we're equipped to do it. In this way will be able to hold on to the saving truth that he has entrusted to us until he comes to divide his sheep from the goats.

“The one who conquers and keeps by works to the end”, Jesus says, “to him I will give authority over the nations.” It suggests an ongoing battle to keep the faith. Satan isn't giving up the fight, so neither can we. But we know that by God's grace he has given us everything we need to win: his truth to hold on to, and his Holy Spirit to give us the strength and faith to hold it. Thus holding fast to his Word, we can be sure that we will conquer, and so be given the right to sit with Christ on his throne and rule with him forever. All praise, glory, and thanks be to him alone. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!