

Jesus & Judgment
Revelation 2:18-29
#5 in a Series from the Book of Revelation
Faith Community Church, August 12, 2007

Introduction

When you compare the letters to the seven churches in Asia that are found in Revelation 2 & 3, you will notice that there is a change between the 4th and 5th churches. In the first four letters – to Ephesus, Sardis, Pergamum and Thyatira – the source of the church’s struggles all center on the issue of staying faithful to Christ in the midst of a culture of idolatry. In the final three letters – to Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea – there is a different problem, something more internal to the church.

As we saw, the problem of idol worship was significant. We talked about emperor worship, how the citizens of these cities were expected to take a vow of supreme allegiance to the emperor each year. For Christians, who rightly took their allegiance to Christ seriously, this was a problem, and a failure to comply with the demands to renounce Christ and embrace Caesar often led to oppression.

In addition, we saw that in many places there were trade guilds that were part of the social and economic culture of the city. One writer says, “The trade guild insured for its members a certain measure of success. These guilds were corporate bodies, which protected the common interests, owned properties, passed decrees, and exercised considerable powers.”¹ In many cities, the actual physical layout of the city was based on the trade guilds, with tanners being in one part of the city, metalworkers being in another part, bankers being in another section, etc.

The problem for Christians was that each guild had a patron deity – an idol that was worshipped and viewed as responsible for the success of the guild. We read that the trade guilds “. . . shared a common meal together, which followed a sacrifice. The meat of the sacrifice was part of the meal. These feasts often degenerated into carousings, drunkenness and immorality. . . . To abstain from the periodic feasting of these guilds would certainly mean loss of livelihood.”²

As I have said several times, we need to grasp the problem that this created for Christians. To participate in these activities would involve doing what God had clearly commanded against. They would know, for example, what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians when he said, “*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;*” (1Thessalonians 4:3-5 ESV).

¹ Karlson, *Background Studies in Revelation Two and Three*. Masters Thesis: Pages 40-41.

² Ibid

But to not participate would bring at least some discomfort, likely social and economic problems, and quite possibly persecution.

The point of these letters – for us – is not how to respond when we are invited to an idol feast. The point is to recognize that there are things in any culture there are ways of living and ways of thinking that can't be a part of our lives if we're going to live under the Lordship of Christ. There will be things that challenge our allegiance, and there will be issues that challenge our morality and character. The trick, of course, is knowing what they are and how to respond, and that comes only when we have saturated our lives with Scripture.

The Church in Thyatira

In Revelation 2:18-29 we read Jesus' words to the church in Thyatira.

Thyatira was a smaller city, not having any real political significance, but being important as a center of trade. As was true in at least two of the three letters that are before this one, the church has encountered false teaching. Here the principal problem is a woman prophetess who is referred to as Jezebel – comparing her to the wife of an Old Testament king who was instrumental in corrupting Israel. She was teaching the same error that had been taught in Ephesus and in Pergamum – that participating in the idol feasts and the accompanying immorality was acceptable. But her presence and power in this church seems to have been greater than the people who were influencing the other churches.

As a result, Jesus lowers the boom. He says that she has had an opportunity to repent, but she has refused. So it is judgment time. Not only will she be severely judged, but those who she causes to sin will also be punished. Those who are her followers – indicating a greater level of commitment to her sinful teaching – will be killed.

Those who have been faithful are encouraged to remain so, and a promise is made to those who conquer – again, a word that describes the person who is a true believer and who shows that by remaining faithful.

The Message of Thyatira and Us

There are more similarities than differences between Thyatira and Pergamum, so in some ways I could repeat the same major ideas I did last week. And that wouldn't be bad, because we need to be reminded often of what God thinks. But there is a specific lesson that is here in this passage that is reinforced frequently in Scripture. And the lesson is this: people whose sin affects the wellbeing of a church are courting God's judgment.

Yikes!

Now, there are two dangers in saying something like this. The first is that we begin to look at God as someone who is sitting in heaven just waiting to nail us. And that is not

true. But the second danger is that when something negative happens to a person – or to a church – we immediately leap to the conclusion that it happened because they did something wrong. Jesus encountered that thinking in his disciples (John 9:1-4), and that kind of superstitious judgmentalism can thrive even today.

For example, some people feel that size is a barometer of success. Church “A” is small, and church “B” is large, growing and influential. The conclusion is that the small ministry or the small church must be doing something wrong and the large church is enjoying God’s blessing. In reality the small church or ministry may be small because they are being faithful and the large church may be large because they’ve compromised the message to such an extent that no one is going to be offended.

Or how about this – you get sick. You have an accident. You have a financial reversal. Do those things happen because you’ve done something wrong? Should you try to do minute analysis of your life so that you can discover what thing ticked God off and brought his judgment? Unless you are living in some known pattern of unrepented sin, I’d be very careful of making that analysis (Psalm 103:10).

But we can go to the other extreme too – and we are good at going to extremes – and act as if God spares all reaction to sin until the day of judgment and that is simply not true. And when it comes to the purity and health of his church, God may not always act overtly in judgment, but sometimes he does.

- When the people of Israel grumbled against the Lord he made them wander for 40 years until that generation had died before the entered the land that had been promised to them (Numbers 14).
- There were people associated with a man named Korah who opposed Moses and met death (Numbers 16).
- When the people of Israel turned to idolatry, despite there being a remnant of people who were faithful to the Lord, God punished them by allowing them to suffer oppression and even captivity.
- When Ananias and Saphira’s duplicity threatened the purity and innocence of the church (Acts 5), God put them both to death.
- In Corinth, a man was sexually involved with his father’s wife. The church was told to turn him out – “deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.”
- Later in the same letter (1 Corinthians 10) Paul says that the behavior of some believers in conjunction with the Lord’s Table had resulted in the sickness of some and the death of others.
- Look at 1 Corinthians 10:6-11
- We have warnings in several of these letters that there are behaviors which, if unrepented of, will bring God’s judgment – sometimes in the form of physical punishment, and sometimes in the form of the death of a local church. These letters were written to churches in what is now modern Turkey. It may well be that there were more Christians in that area in the 1st century than there are today.

Connecting this Passage to Our Lives

Well, why talk about this? Is this some subtle way of saying that something is wrong here and that God is judging us or is going to? Not at all. But I have chosen to focus on this aspect of the passage for several reasons:

1. Because we live in a Christian culture that knows little about God's justice and holiness. As a result, we live with a deficient view of God.
2. Because we need to pray for our church, that God would help us to please him. Praying for your church is a good way of countering the non-biblical idea that your relationship to a community of Christians is only a small part of your life – just one more thing to do.
3. Because our conscious goal must always be holiness and bringing glory and pleasure to the God who saved us.

So let's live right, let's remember the encouragement in Hebrews: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." (Hebrews 3:12-13 ESV), and let's pray for our church, that we would please God and experience his blessing – in number and in depth, as we "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18b).