

Revelation 2:18-29 Thyatira

Our 1st Century postman on his route to deliver these seven letters would leave Pergamum heading southeast to Thyatira, about thirty-five miles inland. Like several of the other letters, there are things in this letter that will be reassuring to the church in Thyatira. However, there are also sharp words of rebuke.

Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities of Revelation. It had little economic or strategic importance. It spent most of its history playing second fiddle to more dominant powers. It's only other appearance in Scripture is in Acts 16 where Paul's first convert in Europe was a Thyatiran merchant in purple cloth named Lydia.

This purple cloth was an expensive, luxury item, because its key ingredients were so rare. This purple dye and purple cloth was the one thing Thyatira was known for. If you were to ask anyone from anywhere else about Thyatira, they would say, "Oh, that's the place with the purple dye."

I used to live in the small town of Grove, Oklahoma, located on Grand Lake. Grand Lake is a large lake in Northeast Oklahoma and people come from all over to fish, camp and vacation at the lake. Grove doubled in size every summer. Everyone not from Grove knows it only for the lake. From an outside perspective there was nothing else of significance about Grove. That's how it was for Thyatira and its purple dye.

Likewise, the church in Thyatira was not famous. It didn't have the rich history of Ephesus. It didn't have the great wealth of Laodicea, but they were the little church that could. It wasn't their fancy programs or big conferences. They did the little things well. They loved God and they loved people. They had an abiding faith. They served one another, and they kept at it without quitting. This was a church with a great record, but also one very big problem.

We'll talk about that problem next week. This is longest of the seven letters, and I gave it a herculean effort to cut this down to one sermon. In fact, I have a version of this message in my office where I cover the whole thing in one sermon, but there was so much that I think is relevant to the church today, that I didn't want to leave on the cutting room floor. So, this week

we will look at what this church is doing well, and consider the applications for our own church and culture.

Who Is Jesus to His Church

18 Jesus' self-portrait to the church in Thyatira includes three features. First, these are ***the words of the Son of God***. This is not Jesus as a baby, meek and mild. This is not Jesus the traveling teacher. This is Jesus in all of his power and glory. This is an unquestionable claim of divinity. It is also an insult to the Roman emperor who often claimed in official documents that he was a "son of god." This is Jesus saying, "I am the true Son of the true God, not a poser like you."

Secondly, He ***has eyes like a flame of fire***. Fire both illuminates and consumes. Eyes of fire see all things and devour all that is not holy. Think of Superman's x-ray vision that can see through walls or melt steel. The eyes of fire show us the omniscience or all-knowing nature of Jesus as the Son of God.

Thirdly, Jesus has ***feet that are like burnished bronze***. The metal here has been purified by being brought to a red-hot glow in a refining furnace.¹ This refined metal symbolizes the purity of Jesus. He is holy in all he does His judgments are righteous and true.

Jesus Knows His Church

19 Since he sees all things, Jesus knows his church deeply. He praises the Thyatiran Christians for four ***works***. The first is their ***love***. He doesn't specify whether it is their love for God or for others. However, Jesus taught in the gospels that these two things are integrally tied together calling them the two greatest commandments. John, who wrote Revelation, wrote in 1 John 4:19-21:

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. -1 Jn. 4:19-21

The heart of the church is love— a love for God, and a love for people. We should be known by our love. To offer Jesus as a gift to our community, we must first be a gift to our community. Most Christians today would agree with this, however, is this what we are most known for?

Unfortunately, it is not. George Barna found the words most commonly associated with Christianity among non-believers were words like hypocritical and judgmental. Some of this is simply due to the immoral climate of our culture and how the media always loves to show the church as the bad guy. When we stand for truth and righteousness, no matter how lovingly we do it, we will be attacked.

Think about this: Jesus was the most loving person who ever lived. He loved perfectly and he loved everyone. He is our model of love, and how did the world respond to him? They murdered him. We should not be surprised when the world treats us the same way. Jesus said, *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you (Jn. 15:18).”* No matter how loving the church is, the world will never love us. We cannot live for, nor should we ever expect the world’s acceptance, praise, or approval. John, in the midst of one of his own calls to love, warns us *“Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you (1 Jn. 3:13).”* This happens, John says, when our own actions are righteous and theirs are evil.

That’s the issue right there. We better make sure our own actions are righteous. If we’re going to be hated, let’s make sure we’re hated because our lives are lights shining in the darkness, not because we’re a bunch of hypocrites who say one thing, but do another. There’s a Facebook meme that says, “I really enjoy all your religious posts on Facebook! Ever consider modifying your behavior to match them?”

Another sad reality is that too often, we simply aren’t loving. I’ve never seen a church that says, “We’re not a loving church.” In fact, every church I’ve ever known says, “We’re a loving church.” Even those who were profoundly unloving, thought they were loving. My father-in-law likes to point out that lots of churches are like loaves of bread. Soft and warm on the inside, but hard and crusty on the outside. Many times those that come to the church most in need of our love, can’t break through the hard crust.

Twenty-four-year-old Jonathan Ferrell had just been in a serious car accident. He went to a nearby house looking for help. Intimidated by the young black man on the porch, the homeowner called 911. When the police arrived, Jonathan ran toward the police believing they could help him. The officers assumed he was a threat, and when the first officer's stun gun malfunctioned, the second officer shot and killed him.ⁱⁱ How often is this the church? People come to us for help at a time when their lives really are a wreck, and instead we shoot them.

Though we may never be portrayed honestly by the media, academia, or other parts of our culture, what makes the difference are individual acts of love. When Christians are willing to roll up their sleeves and get involved in the mess of another person's life and love them generously and sacrificially, it gives proof and persuasion to our message.

Last week, several of us had the opportunity to express our love to Chuck and Joyce Embree by putting in a wheelchair ramp for them. We couldn't have done this without Tim Dudley's fearless leadership. Here's the cool thing there are now a number of wheelchair ramps in this down that Tim and the men of this church are responsible for.

These haven't all been for our own people either. Some of these have been for complete strangers, but when you drive by and see that wheelchair ramp it's a testimony to the love of God, because it's a demonstration of the love this church has for people.

There are children who went to school with new shoes because of the love and generosity of this congregation. I know this for sure there are literally hundreds of kids in Marshfield who had fresh, clean underwear for school this year, because of your love for people. Who ever thought that underwear would be a demonstration of God's love, but it is.

There are people who have made it to work and made it to doctor's appointments, because you put gas in their car. There are families who can go to sleep at night without being hungry because you put food in their bellies. There are families who stayed warm this winter because you cut them firewood and you paid their utility bills.

There are young, single moms in this community who have decided to keep their babies instead of aborting them, they have had clean diapers and formula and bottles and onzies because of your love, because you participated in Choices Pregnancy Center Walk for Life, because you

wrote a check at their annual fundraising dinner, or you filled a baby bottle with money. Choices is our mission of the month and they are a tangible expression of God's love that makes a difference in individual lives, and sometimes that difference is life itself. To offer Jesus as a gift to our community, we must first be a gift to our community.

The second quality that Jesus commends them for is their ***faith***. Thyatira has a steadfast dependence on God in light of such overwhelming challenges. They are not just cultural Christians whose faith dissipates in the face of persecution like a fog in the morning sun.

If you are going to swim upstream against the culture, it will require such a deep, abiding *faith*. *Faith* is the anchor will keep us from being swept away.

Thirdly, he commends them for their ***service***. Originally, the word used here denoted waiting on tables but by the 1st Century it came to refer to a broad range of service or ministry. It is not clear in what ways this *service* is distinguished from the aforementioned *love*. It is likely that *service* envisions their works of ministry within the body of Christ;ⁱⁱⁱ whereas *love* has a much broader range of application outside the body.

Of course, service doesn't come naturally in a "selfie" culture. Our sinful nature tells us we will be happiest if we are being served. We like to have our desires catered to. But Christ calls us in a different direction. Such service doesn't come naturally to us as people, it comes from the Spirit of Christ. This word is twice included in the lists of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:7. 1 Cor. 12:5; 1 Pt. 4:11).

Service may well be the cure to what ails us most deeply. Rates of depression and other anxiety disorders are rising dramatically. The millennial generation is more susceptible to depression than any other living generation.^{iv} Depending on the study, young adults are up to ten times more likely to suffer from depression than their grandparents. The average age of the onset of depression has dropped from the forties and fifties to the twenties.^v

How can this be? We have more comforts and conveniences than ever before. Life is objectively and tangibly easier now than at any time in history, so why are we so depressed? Why are we so stressed out? In part, it is because we have so many cultural experiences that exalt the self. This begins on the day we are born with demand feeding—parents are taught that their baby

should be fed whenever they demand it. We are rewarded for selfishness and entitlement from day one. From then on everything from helicopter parenting to participation trophies to social media has led to a huge discrepancy between reality and what we expect from life. My life can never compete with what my friend's lives look like on Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram.

We are throwing ever increasing amounts of medication at our mountains of anxiety with only limited success. While medication can offer temporary and many times necessary relief from symptoms, they often mask the underlying cause. In fact, studies have found that short-term and long-term improvement offered by medication for depression is less than 2% than with placebos alone.^{vi} In other words, our pills aren't making us happier. They're just masking the problem.

Serving others cuts to the heart of much of our depression and anxiety. Meeting the needs of others counters the unmet expectations in our lives. Service takes our eyes off of ourselves and our problems as we focus on the problems of others. This alone expands our heart exponentially, and reminds us of all we have to be thankful for. It helps break the cycle of feeling sorry for ourselves. In healing the wounds of others, we find that ours begin to heal as well. In serving we rediscover our self-worth showing that we have value and can make a difference in the lives of others. Most importantly, in serving you will find the joy and blessing of God.

Finally, the believers in Thyatira were marathon runners, and not just sprinters. Jesus extols their ***patient endurance***. Originally, this word meant to remain in one place. It is the picture of a soldier who will not abandon their post. The soldiers at the Tomb of the Unknowns are famous for keeping guard even in the midst of severe weather such as Superstorm Sandy in 2012 or the historic blizzard in January 2016.^{vii} This was the church at Thyatira. They were tireless and steadfast.

It is one thing to be strong for a short burst. It's another thing to be strong over the long haul. But listen to what Jesus tells them, ***your latter works exceed the first***. This is opposite of what Jesus told the church in Ephesus. They had abandoned the love they had at first. Not Thyatira. They weren't fizzling over time. They were growing in their love, faith, service and endurance.

You should be able to look back over your life and see a pattern of growth. Can you honestly say, “I’m not the same person I was 5 years ago, 10 years ago”? Or do you find yourself saying things like, “I just can’t help it. That’s just the way I am. You’ll have to deal with it.”

The Christian life is just that— It’s a life. It’s a living thing. Life grows and develops. Your Christian life should be growing and blossoming. Sure, we all experience times of setback and dry seasons. There are times when God must do some pruning in our lives, but that is to produce fruit. Last year, Teresa cut our Rose bush way back. You know what we have this year? More roses than ever before.

It doesn’t have to be major accomplishments and earthshattering successes. There just needs to be growth. Like Thyatira, do the little things well. Jesus doesn’t congratulate Thyatira for their historic accomplishments, their big events, and massive programs. They were faithful in the little things. They loved. They had faith. They served. They endured.

You don’t have to do things of great significance to be significant in God’s eyes. Thyatira was a small, insignificant church in a small, insignificant town, but they were the little church that could.

Thyatira may have been the least significant of the seven cities, and the least significant of the seven churches, but they received the longest letter of any of the churches. Jesus does not measure your significance the same way as the world does. He doesn’t measure size and value the way the world does.

There are some of us this morning who are really struggling with questions of significance. You wonder if you really matter. In the big picture, does anyone even notice what you do? The letter to Thyatira assures us that even if nobody else notices, your Lord and Savior does. He sees. He knows. Who you are and what you do matters in his eyes. No matter where you serve, no matter how you serve, don’t think it doesn’t matter. It matters to him.

ⁱ Hemer makes a strong case that a “finer and purer brass” than that of in typical use was produced in Thyatira. See Hemer, p. 112-16

ⁱⁱ King, Jessica, and AnneClaire Stapleton. "Charlotte police kill ex-FAMU player who may have been running to them for help." CNN. Cable News Network, 13 Sept. 2013. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aune, David E. p. 202

^{iv} Castillo, Michelle. *Millennials are the most stressed generation, survey finds*. CBSNews. CBS Interactive, 11 Feb. 2013. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.

^v Walker, Kim. *Millenials are having the worst time of their lives – study*. The Silver Blog. Mar. 15, 2016. Web Dec. 14, 2016.

^{vi} Kirsch, Irving. "Antidepressants and the Placebo Effect." *Zeitschrift Fur Psychologie*. Hogrefe Publishing, 2014. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.

^{vii} Martinez, Luis (Jan 22, 2016) "Soldiers Continue to Guard Tomb of Unknowns at Arlington During Historic Snowstorm." ABC News. Retrieved December 15, 2016 from <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/soldiers-continue-guard-tomb-unknowns-arlington-historic-snowstorm/story?id=36453042>