

# How to Live Like a Christian in a Pagan World

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## **Text:**

Revelation 2:18-29

"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

## **Introduction:**

Although much has changed in the two millennia that separate us from these seven churches, one thing remains the same. The church at all times and in all places is subject to persecution from without and temptation from within. As we examine these seven churches we are learning that none of them had a trouble-free existence. For some the test was to endure persecution, for others to resist temptation, but all are called to vigilance and endurance. Our Christian existence is defined by the fact that we are in the world, but not of the world. We march to the drumbeat of our Lord, Jesus Christ and it never matches the drumbeat of the world. The world may persecute us from without as in the cases of Sardis, or it may seduce us from within as in the case of Thyatira that we are about to examine, or it may do both at once

as in the case of Pergamum. Whatever the case, we are called to vigilance. We are to be the light of the world, and the salt of the earth. We must not hide our light or let our salt lose its savor.

The first thing we notice about Thyatira is that it is highly commended. If verse 19 were a grade it would be an A if not an A+. Christ says to this church: "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first". Not only do they possess the essential Christian graces: love, faith, service, and endurance, but, unlike Ephesus that had lost its first love, they are growing and increasing and their "latter works exceed the first." Unfortunately, the message to this church does not end with these words. The next sentence begins with "but" and continues with "I have this against you". All is not well in Thyatira in spite of the high commendation they receive from Christ. If the majority in Thyatira was not actively participating in evil, it was, nevertheless, tolerating someone who was sowing the seeds of destruction.

A little information about the city of Thyatira will help us understand the problem. First it was closely linked to Pergamum. It was located 40 miles south of Pergamum at the southern end of a valley connecting the Caicus river valley and its chief city, Pergamum, with the Hermas river valley and its chief city Sardis. It was much smaller than Pergamum, but Pergamum was dependent upon it as a first line of defense. It had been founded as a garrison city, but during the years of the *Pax Romana* it had thrived as a city of manufacturing and trade. The only other time it is mentioned in the New Testament is in Acts 17 where Lydia, the first believer in Philippi is said to have come from Thyatira. Lydia would have been a typical citizen of Thyatira. She was a manufacturer and merchant of a purple cloth for which the city was known. The city was made up of households like hers that produced and sold goods to traders that travelled the major highway that traversed the city.

This is directly related to the problem of the church. The craftsmen and tradesmen of the city, as was customary in the Roman Empire, banded together in what were known as trade and craft guilds. It would have been very difficult to run a successful business without belonging to the corresponding guild. The problem is that all of the guilds were dedicated to pagan deities and members were expected to participate in common meals in honor of the patron god or goddess. It is at these meals that participants would be implicated in the two things that the woman in the text, referred to as Jezebel, was teaching were permissible; eating food offered to idols, and sexual immorality.

This was one of the great issues in the early Gentile Church. Christians were a minority. Their world was dominated by pagan beliefs and practices. Could they participate in these practices without doing damage to themselves and their testimony? Paul deals with both the issues implicated in this passage in I Corinthians. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 had put both off

limits to Gentile believers. As previously noted in the case of Pergamum the Nicolaitan teaching, being promoted both at Pergamum and Thyatira, was, at least in part, a compromise with the decision of the council that would allow believers to continue to participate in these pagan activities.

One of the early Roman descriptions of Christians calls them “atheists” and “haters of humanity”. This came directly from their refusal to participate in the rites and rituals of the surrounding pagan society. It is not difficult to imagine the pressure believers felt from pagan family members and fellow workers to not be different. We should have no problem identifying with this. We are well aware that even though we live in a Christian world there is still plenty of pagan pressure to conform. The temptation may be more subtle and less direct, but it is just as persistent for us as for the Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman Empire.

I have a friend who is about the same age as my son. From the time he was a small boy he wanted to be a pilot. He worked hard in school so he could realize his dream. When he was ready and the opportunity presented itself, he applied to British Airways pilot’s school. He passed the tests and met all of the qualifications, but in the end he was turned down. The reason he was given was that he had made it clear in his application that he was a Christian and lived as a Christian. You might think that that would be in his favor. It was not. The deciding board deemed that this would make it difficult for him to fit in socially. He might make a good pilot, but he would probably not make a good fellow in the guild of pilots. Many of you can identify with this story and could tell similar stories. Taking a position as a Christian and refusing to participate in unchristian activities is not always a good way to improve business or get a promotion. The problem is not new. Christians throughout history have all had to face the reality of not being conformed to the world; of being the light of the world without letting the world cover our lamp. How do we do it? Two things stand out as essential:

- We must be fully devoted to Jesus Christ and keenly aware of his teachings
- We must clearly take position for Jesus Christ

## **I. We must be fully devoted to Jesus Christ and keenly aware of his teachings**

It would be easy to imagine the prophetess of Thyatira as a wicked person. This was probably not the case. She was, most likely, a diligent and devoted Christian. She no doubt was pleasant and had a winning personality; otherwise a church with such a high commendation would have long ago excluded her. She was no doubt reasonable and persuasive. I can almost hear her say: “I love Jesus and want to serve him as much as any of you, but I am also a business woman and I must provide for my family and keep my employees working.” “I know that the trade

guild meetings are dedicated to a pagan god, but in the end he is nothing and has no power, so I will participate out of necessity, but I will not allow myself to be tainted by what goes on.” Many Christians throughout history have been misled by such reasoning.

The only way to avoid this is to have one’s ears so closely attuned to the Word of Christ, that all other words immediately sound false. I have for many years studied and tried to understand what happened to the German Church in the 1930’s and why it was so easily taken in by Hitler and German nationalism. I have done this out of more than idle curiosity. If such a thing could happen in Germany then something similar might happen to us. I have been especially interested by that small minority who refused to goose step to the Nazi beat. The thing that stands out is that they were without exception individuals who were fully devoted to Jesus Christ and thus recognized that the drumbeat of Hitler was diametrically opposed to the drumbeat of Christ. Our stand may be for smaller issues, but the principle does not change. When Christ says no, we must never say yes. If we know what he says we will not be swayed by the seductive discourses of the Baalams and Jezebels who raise their voices within the churches.

## **II. We must clearly take position for Jesus Christ**

It has become evident from our study of these letters that the Christian does not make his decision on the basis of expediency. The questions we ask before deciding are not: “What’s in it for me?” or, “How can I best benefit from this?” Our first question should always be: “What’s right?” “What is Jesus saying to me?” We must, as we have seen, ultimately be “faithful unto death.” Few will be called to be martyrs, but all of us are regularly called to take a stand for Christ. Invitations must sometimes be refused with the simple statement: “I’m a Christian. I can’t do that.” It is so important wherever we are and whatever we are doing to simply let it be known that we belong to Jesus Christ and we only go where he goes, and only do what he approves. If we fail to do so, we become like Lot who “vexed his righteous soul” in Sodom. He so hid his light that when he really needed to let it shine no one took him seriously. His light had been extinguished by the darkness of Sodom, but it need not have been so. Even in Sodom we can be light, but we must not fear to take the bushel off our light and put it on the lamp stand so all can see it. We don’t have to be obnoxious in doing it. In fact, that would be contrary to the spirit of Christ. But we must be clear. Learn to say with conviction by word and by deed. “I belong to Jesus Christ, I march to his drumbeat and no other.”

