

**THYATIRA: TOILSOME BUT TOLERANT**  
**Rev 2:18-29 (3 March 2002)**  
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“In God We Trust” . . . so declares the currency of the United States of America. This motto fascinates me. Why? Because on what seems to me to be the most recognizable symbol of American materialism, there is inscribed this remarkable spiritual statement. Our money says that it is *not* to be the object of our trust. Our money reminds us that it is *not* to be our master. But do our lives practice what our money preaches? Do we put our money where our money’s mouth is?

For you history buffs, the motto “In God We Trust” was placed on United States coins largely because of the religious sentiment existing during the Civil War. The words first appeared on the 1864 two-cent coin. Since 1938, all United States coins bear the inscription. “In God We Trust” was first used on paper money in 1957, when it appeared on the one-dollar silver certificate.

My point is not to debate the merits of this motto, nor is it to discuss whether or not the message still has meaning for today. *My point is this: our money depicts the ongoing struggle between the material and the spiritual.* In the words of Jesus,

No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money (Matt 6:24, NLT).

In the ancient city of Thyatira, the church faced the temptation to compromise its spiritual possessions to achieve material prosperity. The question at Thyatira was, who will you serve? The Almighty God or the “almighty dollar”? (I realize my anachronistic use of “dollar.”)

In the prophetic messages of Jesus Christ to the seven churches of Asia Minor, the longest and most difficult of these messages is addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable of the seven cities. Thyatira was located about thirty-five miles inland, between Pergamum and Sardis. According to legend, the city was first established as a shrine to the sun-god Tyrinnos (identified with the Greek sun-god Apollo) and named Pelopia. One of the significant characteristics of Thyatira was the prominence of various trade-guilds, including associations of clothiers, bakers, tanners, potters, linen workers, wool merchants, slave traders, shoemakers, dyers, and copper smiths. The city was known throughout the ancient world as a city of merchants and trade guilds, and its local gods were dedicated to the city’s economic well-being. *Unlike Pergamum, which was the official center in Asia for the worship of Caesar, the idolatry in Thyatira was materialism.* The “almighty dollar” was worshipped in Thyatira. According to Acts 16:14, Thyatira was the home of Lydia, a “dealer in purple cloth” and a “worshipper of God” whom Paul encountered at Philippi in Macedonia.

Now, let’s read the words of Jesus Christ spoken to the Christians in Thyatira. We find His words in Rev 2:18-29.

Rev 2:18<sup>18</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

<sup>19</sup>“I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. <sup>20</sup>But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. <sup>21</sup>I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. <sup>22</sup>Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; <sup>23</sup>and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. <sup>24</sup>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; <sup>25</sup>only hold fast to what you have until I come. <sup>26</sup>To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,

I will give authority over the nations;  
<sup>27</sup>to rule them with an iron rod,  
as when clay pots are shattered—  
<sup>28</sup>even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. <sup>29</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (NRSV).

The speaker of these words describes himself as “the Son of God.” Only here in the Book Revelation is this title found (and Ps 2:7 may have suggested its use here) and it stands in strong contrast to the local worship of Apollo Tyrimnos, which was merged with that of the emperor—who was identified as Apollo incarnate—so that both were acclaimed as sons of Zeus. But it is not the emperor or the guardian deity of Thyatira who are sons of god; it is the resurrected Christ who is the true Son of God. The blazing eyes (v. 18) suggest the penetrating power of the one who searches minds and hearts (v. 23) to see through the seductive arguments of Jezebel and those who are being lead astray by her salacious teaching. Feet like burnished bronze (v. 18) convey the idea of strength and splendor, and with such feet the Son of God can stamp out all opposition to His rule.

The glorified Christ commended the church at Thyatira for its love, faith, service, and perseverance (v. 19). Love and faith are the motivating forces behind all genuine Christian work, and service and perseverance are the results that follow. *Love and faith are the roots, and service and perseverance are the fruits.* While the love of the Ephesian church had decreased (2:4), the practical expression of love at Thyatira had increased (v. 19b).

But all was not well at Thyatira: Jezebel was there. Old Testament Jezebel, the wicked queen of King Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 18-19; 2 Kings 9), was not a prophetess, but she sponsored 850 false prophets and she sought to take the lives of God’s true prophets. She is never accused of literal harlotry, but she fostered spiritual harlotry by leading Israel away from the LORD God. The Thyatiran Jezebel—and the name “Jezebel” was likely not a real name but the title given to this corrupt character by Christ—was probably some prominent woman within the church who, like her Old Testament counterpart, influenced the people of God to forsake loyalty to God by promoting a

participation in pagan practices. Her punishment fit her crime: a bed, the typical place of sexual activity, was also the place of one bedfast from sickness. The so-called “deep things of Satan” may be a sarcastic reversal of Jezebel’s main slogan. Claiming to know the deep secrets of God, she and her followers were told that the deep secrets they claimed to know were really the deep secrets of Satan. On the other hand, knowing Satan’s deep secrets may be a reference to the teaching that in order to appreciate fully the grace of God one must first experience the depths of evil. This is similar to what the Apostle Paul refers to in Rom 6 when he mentions those who advocated sinning more in order to receive more grace.

Using language from the second Psalm, the victorious Christ promised to the victors at Thyatira that they would share with Him in His triumphant reign (vv. 26-27). He also promised “the morning star” (v. 28). No completely satisfying solution for this symbol has been offered. The suggestion that I find least unsatisfying is that we have here an allusion to the promised star of Num 24:17, which many ancient Jews understood to be the Messiah. In Rev 22:16, Christ is explicitly called “the bright morning star.”

Now, there are two practical points that I want to pursue. First, for some people today tolerance is the only real virtue and intolerance the only vice. *The message to Thyatira goes against the grain of modern thinking by setting limits to tolerance.* The main criticism of this church is that it has tolerated something—and someone—that should not be tolerated. Compare this to our contemporary culture where the only absolute of pluralism is that there are no absolutes. Almost three-fourths of Americans in the 18-25 age bracket believe there is no such thing as absolute truth; and this view appears to be shared by over half of those who claim to be born-again Christians (George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Regal, 1991), 83-85). Our society believes in “absolute relativism.” Now there’s an oxymoron for you! Absolute relativism—it means that everyone is right unless one claims to be. I need to point out that by the term “tolerance” I am *not* referring to the biblical virtue of loving those who disagree with us. What I am referring to is the intellectual paralysis that is caused by the fear to disagree. I am talking about the notion that everyone is right unless one claims to be. The church at Ephesus was warned about the dangers of intolerance; that is, a loveless rightness. The church at Thyatira was warned about the dangers of tolerance; that is, a “soft” love that permits all things and judges none. Ephesus needed to be more loving, and Thyatira needed to be less tolerant. Love and faith—as mentioned in the message to Thyatira—we need them both. We must love and we must believe that there is something to be believed.

My second practical point goes back to the beginning of this lesson—money. Detroit, “the Motor City,” we have an understanding of organized labor and labor unions. We know that a “scab” is not always a medical term. Ancient Thyatira had a guild—a “labor union”—for almost every trade, and most people involved in any economic activity belonged to one guild or another. And, since all the guilds had patron deities, Christian guild members would have been expected to pay homage to pagan gods at official guild meetings, which were usually festive occasions that often included immoral behavior. Nonparticipation—to be a scab—would likely cause one to be “blacklisted.” What was a Christian to do? “Well,” said Jezebel, “go right ahead and join a guild and participate in its feasts and frivolity. After all, you know ‘the deep things of God.’ You know that an idol is nothing and so you cannot be defiled by that which does not exist. Besides, God wants you to prosper and to take care of your family.” Sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? A

fast way for a prophet to become popular is to say what people want to hear, and that is exactly what Jezebel did. *The problem that confronted every Christian in Thyatira was whether they were to make money or be Christians.*

I am *not* suggesting that belonging to a labor union today is exactly like belonging to a trade-guild in ancient Thyatira. That is *not* what I am saying. But, having said that, I do not want to ignore the many similarities that *do* exist. The fundamental question is still, *to whom (or to what) do we ultimately look for our well-being?* We cannot serve both the Almighty God and “the almighty dollar.” Americans, just like Thyatirans, cannot serve two masters. Just how much of this world can we tolerate for the sake of economic prosperity?

In many cities, a young man can make hundreds of dollars more in a day dealing drugs on the corner than working at McDonald’s, often the next best-paying alternative. In some corporations an individual can advance only by sacrifices likely to destroy their family or ruin their Christian faith. In academia those who do not toe the correct party line of an institution risk their job. *The approval of Jesus Christ on the Day of Judgment must matter more to us than wealth or status in this life, or we will be seduced by Jezebel and succumb to the temptation of the Thyatiran Christians.* “In God We Trust” . . . it must be more than a motto; it must be a way of life.

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