

Revelation 2:20

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Jesus corrects the church in Thyatira for how they have allowed “the woman Jezebel” to lead believers into sinful acts that lead away from trust in God and deeds of faith.

After the church in Thyatira is praised for their good deeds in the faith, the passage moves on to the exhortation, the correction of what they are doing wrong. As Jesus will soon state, He reproves those whom He loves, so they will repent (Revelation 3:19). This is because walking in obedience to Jesus is actually the path that serves our true self-interest. Biblical (“agape”) love is doing for others what is in their best interest. In the case of Jesus, He is all-knowing, and actually knows what is in our best interest. Therefore He leads us with truth.

The fundamental problem Jesus has here with *the woman Jezebel* is that the church in Thyatira *tolerates* her and allows her to teach and lead *My bond-servants astray, so they commit acts of immorality*. This is a letter to the church, not to *Jezebel*, so Jesus is going to correct the ways that they are complicit in this wrongdoing, because they *tolerate* a false teacher who is leading people *astray*.

How is this admonition by Jesus to “not tolerate” compatible with His admonition in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged?” (Matthew 7:1). The pattern in scripture is that authorities who teach are the exception to this general principle. Individuals who walk in sin are condemning themselves. As Romans 1 states, God eventually brings His “wrath” upon them by turning them over to their own lusts; allowing them to have what they want. This leads to what we might call in our era addiction and loss of mental health (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

However, false teachers lead people astray. Accordingly, they are to be evaluated, called out, and stopped.

Jesus exhibited the distinction between not judging individuals while holding authorities accountable in His own walk. He was severely criticized for fellowshiping with sinners and outcasts. His retort to the religious leaders’ criticism was, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Jesus was tolerant of sinners just as a doctor tolerates illness that he might offer an opportunity for healing. Jesus did not enable their sinfulness; He engaged constructively with them in order to offer them a better way.

Conversely, Jesus did not tolerate false teachers, leaders who preyed on those whom they were appointed to serve. A few examples of His intolerance of such evil are listed below. The scribes and Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders, who were taking advantage of those whom they were supposed to lead and serve. Jesus spoke to them with severity:

- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all

uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:27-28).

- “So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?” (Matthew 23:31-33).

The Sadducees were also Jewish religious leaders. They ran the priesthood, and conducted the affairs of the Jewish temple. They had started using the temple to exploit the worshippers, and Jesus called them out as well:

- “And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER’; but you are making it a ROBBERS’ DEN.’” (Matthew 21:12-13)

The Bible states that Jesus will also apply a higher standard to those who presume to teach others, saying:

“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”
(James 3:1)

Jesus is admonishing the church at Thyatira for not holding accountable a teacher and leader. He is not here judging *the woman Jezebel*. He is rather judging the church for tolerating her to continue as a teacher and leader. Her specific sins are set forth by Jesus:

- She *calls herself a prophetess*. This infers that this is a self-appointed position rather than a position appointed by God.
 - There are prophetesses in scripture that are appointed by God (Exodus 15:20; Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22; Nehemiah 6:14; Isaiah 8:3; Luke 2:36).
 - Those prophetesses are also held to the high standard of a prophet (Numbers 12:1-10).
- *She teaches and leads My bond-servants astray*
 - This woman is teaching, but she is teaching in such a manner as to lead *astray* Jesus’s *bond-servants*
 - The specific way she is leading Jesus’s servants *astray* is also spelled out. Her teaching is leading them to *commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols*

The Greek word “doulos,” translated *bond-servants*, is the same word found in the opening verse of Revelation: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants (“doulos”).” Every believer in Jesus is a “doulos.” The Bible is primarily addressed to the servants of God in order to show them how to be good and faithful servants, rather than wicked and lazy servants (for Jesus’s parable about lazy servants, read our commentary on

Matthew 25:14-30). The entire book of Revelation is written in order to teach and lead believers in Jesus how to walk in obedience to Him. This *woman Jezebel* is doing the opposite, she is teaching and leading Jesus's servants away from His teachings. She is a false-prophetess, a false-teacher, and is leading people astray. Therefore, she should be opposed and her influence eliminated.

It seems likely that the phrase *woman Jezebel* is intended to identify a female leader having influence in the church not by name but by type. *Jezebel* is an infamous character from the Old Testament. She was a pagan wife taken by the Israelite king, Ahab, who "did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him (1 Kings 16:33).

Jezebel was from Sidon, one of the Phoenician cities that God left alone when the Israelites failed to tear down the altars in the Promised Land. After Israel finished wandering in the wilderness for forty years following their escape from Egypt, they were commanded to destroy all altars to idols in the Promised Land, but they failed to do this. Because of Israel's disobedience, God said:

"I will not drive them out before you; but they will become *as thorns* in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."
(Judges 2:3)

The main way that these nations tormented the Israelites was by tempting them to follow their gods, who provided moral justification for sexual exploitation and debauchery. We see this with the *woman Jezebel* of Thyatira in the way she leads believers to *eat things sacrificed to idols*. To *eat things sacrificed to idols* implies that the false-prophetess was leading believers in Thyatira to syncretize or mesh pagan practices together with Christian practice. The result is that this leads them to *commit acts of immorality*, which makes sense, as pagan religious practices centered on various forms of sexual immorality, even including bestiality (sex with animals, see Leviticus 18:23).

But not only did the original *Jezebel* of the Old Testament try to *lead* the Israelites toward her gods, she also "destroyed the prophets of the Lord," attempting to create a monopoly on religion and financially profiting through it.

A secondary reason that God left Sidon to stand, in part due to Israel's disobedience, was to teach the Israelites war against temptation. This is described in Judges 3:

"Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them (*that is*, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order than the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly)...They were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the Lord, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses."
(Judges 3:1,3)

This image of going to battle to defeat temptation is repeated throughout the Bible, most notably in Ephesians 6 where believers are instructed to “put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil,” for it is explained that:

“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.”
(Ephesians 6:11-12)

Among the Israelites at the time of the Old Testament Jezebel were those who had not experienced earthly war. But they all needed to be ready to arm themselves against spiritual war and resist temptation. So it is with New Testament believers. New Testament believers are supposed to put on our full armor of God and storm the gates of Hades (Matthew 16:18). It is in this way they can be overcomers, overcoming sin and temptation.

In the letter to the church in Pergamum, the believers there were chastised for “holding to the teaching of Balaam,” which was “to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts* of immorality,” meaning sexual *immorality* (Revelation 2:14). And now again here in the letter to the church in Thyatira, the *woman Jezebel* is *leading* believers, or *bond-servants*, to “commit *acts* of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20).

The sin at the root of these two actions is a wrong view of God, and choosing to trust the wrong thing. It is to believe that God is not in control, and/or that He does not have our best interest at heart. Instead of trusting that God’s instructions lead us to our true self-interest, we trust in other means. When we go to *idols* we are just looking for a moral justification to follow our appetites. Ironically, we do this seeking freedom, but it actually leads to slavery, addiction, and loss/death (Romans 6:16).

The reality is that by chasing the illusion that “I am in control” over our lives, we become a slave to the things we are pursuing. The will of God is that we become sanctified, set apart from sin and the flesh in order to pursue the higher calling of being servant leaders in His kingdom. We cannot be effective at serving others if we are cultivating a heart to extract sexual pleasure from others. This would seem to fit with the explicit statement of God’s will for our life from 1 Thessalonians:

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.”
(1 Thessalonians 4:3)

A major difference between *Jezebel* and Balaam is that, while they both led believers to commit the same sinful acts, they had different motivations. Balaam was trying to maintain his office as a prophet while also using his office to pursue financial gain. It seems *Jezebel* only cared about worldly power and wanted to use her religious position to gain political power. Balaam wanted riches, Jezebel wanted power. They differed in how they prioritized the “lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16) but they were both pursuing the “things in the world” (1 John 2:15).

The *woman Jezebel* of Thyatira was teaching and leading the believers there to pursue the things of the world, and the reward of the world, which is death. God might have called her *Jezebel* because she was seeking positional power, which would be indicated by her self-proclaimed office of being a *prophetess*. She was seeking the things in the world, and the rewards of the world, rather than the things of God, and His rewards. In the last section of this letter, Jesus will address the rewards He will give to those who are faithful.

All seven churches who received these letters existed at once, so any church can have the characteristics and issues displayed by these churches at any time. But these letters can also be viewed as representing eras of the western church. The church in Thyatira can be viewed as representing from 800 when Charlemagne ascended the throne as the Holy Roman Emperor until 1517 when Martin Luther tacked the ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany.

In the time leading up to Luther, other men like Wycliff and Tyndale wanted to translate the Bible into a common language (in 1384 and 1536 respectively), but they had to deal with pushback from the church. Like Jezebel, the church had begun to prioritize control and power, so they did not want the Bible to get into the hands of the people, lest the power of the priests be diminished. Tyndale's stated objective was, "I want the plowboys in England to know more about the Bible than the Bishops do," an objective for which he was strangled and burned at the stake.

The church in Thyatira is called the corrupt church by some. However, we know from the first part of the letter that many were growing and maturing in their faith. Their problem was that they did not adequately oppose the corruption that had crept in to their leadership.

Biblical Text

²⁰ **But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit *acts of immorality* and eat things sacrificed to idols.**