

In our day, the Christian faces great pressures in the work environment. We have almost come to the place where there is often warfare at work. Management has been pitted against labor; the administration has dug the trenches with the unions across the battlefield, and we along with many other Christians are thrust into this type of environment every day. Whether in management or in the labor union, the Christian is continuously asked to test his conscience in performing questionable practices. Sometimes the requests are even deceitful, unjust, or just simply unethical. What should be the Christian's response? Should he leave his Christianity at home on Monday morning only to pick it up again Friday evening as he prepares for worship on the weekend? Or should he attempt to bring Christ into the place of employment with him? Is it even possible to do this in these days or are we thinking in idealistic but unrealistic terms?

It is helpful for us to realize that the struggles we face today in the marketplace are not unique, but they are struggles that Christians have faced ever since the church was born. And John's letter to the church at Thyatira is going to help us consider this matter, for these early Christians faced the same struggles that we face today, in fact they were even been more intense in the pagan environment of the Roman Empire. So let us look with John at Christianity at Work, principles for serving the Lord in the marketplace.

Now it is interesting that the longest of the 7 letters to these churches in Asia Minor was written to the smallest and least important of the 7 cities as David Nunn said in the video. Thyatira was really a town dwarfed in importance by Ephesus and Pergamum. It was not a politically significant city. It had temples to Artemis and Apollo, but Thyatira was not known as a center of special religious importance. But there was one area in which Thyatira shined- that was industry. Thyatira was a commercial center. There were more trade unions in Thyatira than in any other town of her size in all of Asia. We know from archaeological finds, for instance, that there were trade guilds for bakers, bronze-workers, clothiers, cobblers, weavers, tanners, dyers and potters in Thyatira. And these are just the vocations that we know for sure. We don't know how many other trade unions that there might have been. You will recall that Lydia, one of the most notable converts in the city of Philippi who was said to be a seller of purple goods in Acts 16:14, came from Thyatira originally and learned her trade there. So Thyatira was a town that was an industrial center, a town of workers, a town of organized laborer, and this fact brought a special challenge to the church which John is going to address.

Now John's message to this church follows the same general pattern that we have seen with most of his other messages. First of all, there is a word of commendation- he praises this church for several

admirable qualities. Then, there is a complaint- this is an area needing improvement. And then finally, there is the reward promised to those who are overcomers.

1. Let's first of all look at the areas of commendation-

READ Rev. 2:18-19.

REV 2:18 "To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

After reminding these people of the omniscience and justice of Jesus Christ using the symbolism of eyes of blazing fire signifying the fact that Christ sees and knows all things, and the symbolism of the feet of burnished bronze that is the common symbol in the Bible for the justice and judgment of God, John speaks of several positive qualities of the church of Thyatira.

There are 4 specific areas of Christian virtue brought out by John- love, faith, service and perseverance. I like what William Barclay says of this commendation in his book entitled "Letters to the 7 churches". Let me quote him for you.

"It is to be noted how these great words go in pairs. Love issues in service; faith issues in endurance. It is as if the Risen Lord was saying: 'if you claim to have Christian love in your heart, you can only prove it by showing that you have Christian service in your life. If you claim to have Christian faith in your soul, you can only prove it by living a life which triumphantly overcomes the world.'"

I think Barclay has captured the spirit of this text. John says that these Thyatiran people were characterized by love, a love for the Lord that motivated them to great service for him. They were also characterized by faith, a faith that led them to trust in the Lord in unsavory circumstances allowing them to endure for His name. Certainly, these characteristics were admirable and to be commended.

But there was another area that John commends. He says "you are now doing more than you did at first." The church at Thyatira was a church on the grow. They were not a backsliding church, or even a stagnant one. They were improving; they were progressing; they were moving forward for the Lord. What an exciting church this must have been to attend- a church where love was freely expressed and where the members were serving the Lord and one another, a church continuously taking steps of faith and standing true in their allegiance to Christ in the midst of adversity. Thyatira was a church on the go, and that was because they were a church on the grow.

2. But we must move on to the area of complaint. Thyatira appeared to be the opposite of the

church at Ephesus. Whereas the Ephesian church could not bear false teachers but had lost their first love, the church here at Thyatira had great love, true love that lead to service, but it also had a toleration for the spreading of error in their midst. Notice this reference as we read our text together.

READ Rev. 2:20-25.

REV 2:20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²² So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. ²³ I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. ²⁴ Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): ²⁵ Only hold on to what you have until I come.

Now John refers to a false prophetess by the name of Jezebel. Whether or not Jezebel was her given name, the name she would use daily, or not we can't say for sure. Jezebel might well have been a name given symbolically by John. And there are several reasons for the possibility of this assumption. John might not have wanted to use her real name publically in a letter, so he gave enough material so that her identity would be clearly known without the ignominy of using her name. Also, the simple fact that Jezebel would have not been a popular name among Christians has led many to feel that it is being used here symbolically. Jezebel was about as popular a name in that day among Christians as it is today. Do you know anybody named Jezebel today? John or Paul or David or Peter or Esther or Ruth or Mary or any other of numerous Biblical examples remain common as names today just as they have since their namesake lived. But the infamous Bible characters have rarely been named by Christians or even those in the world. Judas is a clear example. Judas had a great heritage in his name. He was named after one of the sons of Jacob, one who was to become the leading tribe in the entire nation of Israel. Out of the tribe of Judah Jesus Christ the Messiah would come forth. This was the tribe which would be the lion; the scepter would not depart from Judah. Yet one man, Judas, came along and so ruined the reputation of that name that comparatively few people since his time were named after him. Jezebel was not a popular name- among Jews, among Gentiles, and especially among Christian people. And so it was very unlikely that a recognized prophetess in the church would have been named Jezebel. But thirdly, it appears likely that John chose the name Jezebel because the Old Testament queen pictured in her actions what this New Testament prophetess was also doing. So Queen Jezebel could become a symbol of this New Testament prophetess in the church of Thyatira. So whether or not Jezebel was her real name, we cannot say with dogmatism. It is likely that it

was not. But the symbolism that John is using in this name Jezebel is very important for us to see here. There was a false prophetess who was leading many astray in the church at Thyatira. And the error of her ways was causing harm to the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Now we have to understand a little something about the historical setting of this church in order to see the message that John is giving here. As we mentioned earlier, the city of Thyatira was known for its trade guilds, its unions. This city had more trade guilds for its size than any other city in all of Asia. And these trade guilds were not just business organizations, but they also were social groups. These guilds would meet weekly for banquets together. If you were a part of the guild, you were to bond together in unity, in solidarity. Now these banquets pictured in many ways the pagan customs of the times. We know that they began and ended with a cup of wine poured out as a libation offering to one of the gods. This was like a prayer of blessing for the meal. And they would regularly go around and include all of the favorite gods of the members- even Jehovah or Christ in turn. Furthermore, the meal usually would follow a sacrifice and the meat that was eaten was that which had been offered to a pagan god. And quite naturally, there was entertainment that would be suggestive and sensual, and the end results of these banquets were drunkenness and often open immorality. The fact that these trade guild banquets were probably referred to is clear from the terminology that John uses concerning this prophetess, Jezebel. In fact, the term translated "bed" in verse 22 in addition to being used of a bed used for night-time sleeping was also the common term used for the cushions used during these banquets. You will recall that these first century people did not eat like we do with chairs seated at tables, but rather the tables were very low, and the banqueters reclined on the floor with these cushions. In fact, the Greek term 'cline' is the word from which we derive our English term recline. So one can easily see how these banquets would become whole evening affairs, and how they could degenerate easily into orgies and immoral occasions.

Now, the Christian was really in a dilemma. If he was to do business in the city, he almost had to be a member of a trade guild. Any manufacturer had to be a member of the trade guild in order for others to buy his products, and he couldn't do business with other businessmen without being a member of some trade guild. Now you just can't do business in any community if you are totally isolated from other businessmen and the people who might buy your products. So what was the Christian businessman to do? Should he join a trade guild and participate in all of these wicked practices, or should he be isolated from the community and hurt his business opportunities?

Now this false prophetess in the church of Thyatira had an answer, an answer that was appealing to many because she was presenting it as revelation from God as a prophetess and because it appeared to be a

pragmatic solution to the problem. Her solution was basically the same one offered by Queen Jezebel of old. Join the trade guilds; participate enthusiastically in all of their activities; compromise your convictions; don't be so narrow in your faith; don't be so legalistic. When the nation of Israel was in difficult straights being sandwiched between Syria to the north and Judah to the south, this was the solution that Queen Jezebel had offered to them. Jezebel's marriage to Ahab was really an alliance between the Phoenicia and Israel. It was an alliance for commercial activity, Tyre and Sidon being the leading trading centers and an alliance for military purposes. The result of the alliance was that Baal worship was brought into Israel, and you will recall that Jezebel had promoted Baal worship thru her false prophets. So the Israelites of old had received this supposed word from God that they were to tolerate these other religious beliefs so that they could become more prosperous financially and so that they could have military peace. Don't be so narrow and legalistic worshiping only Jehovah as the single true and living God. Accept Baal and the other gods of Phoenicia as well. John's Jezebel was doing the same thing, and just as Elijah of old met those false prophets on Mt. Carmel and exposed them, so John was speaking as God's prophet in the first century, saying that the sacrificing of Christian convictions was not God's will in the marketplace. Jezebel was saying that the Christian could leave his convictions at the door when he left Church on Sunday, and pick them up on the way in the next week. Jezebel was saying that Christianity did not have any relevance in the pragmatic business world. Jezebel was saying that Christians should act like those in the world, and the implication was that thru their compromise the world would be more accepting of Christ. John said that this was bringing great harm to the testimony of Christ and this church at Thyatira. Christianity has been designed by God to be a way of life, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

Now, we wish that John would have tackled some of the hard questions that we face today in the business world. The issues of immorality and recognizing false gods in the workplace are quite clear cut to our minds, but most of us don't face these specific issues today, do we? We face the temptations of dishonest and deceitful practices, cutting corners, holding back on our potential work productivity because of peer pressure, supporting causes that we don't agree with in union dues and numerous other more subtle things that we are told we must do if we are to be successful in this pragmatic business world. But the point that John is making, I feel, is that the Christian may not violate his conscience in his field of employment. Like Daniel of old, he must so do his business that even the closest scrutiny demonstrates him to be a man or woman of the utmost integrity.

3. Now, I can imagine what some of you may be thinking. This is easy for a preacher to say. But sometimes, in the business world, you just have to violate your conscience in order to be successful- there is

no other way. Do you really have to violate your conscience? Is there no other way?

It is most interesting how John finishes this letter to the people at Thyatira. He says, READ Rev.2:26-29.

REV 2:26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations--

REV 2:27 'He will rule them with an iron scepter;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery' --

just as I have received authority from my Father. ²⁸ I will also give him the morning star. ²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Now I believe that there is a 2-fold promise given here. Certainly, there is a futuristic promise related to the millennial reign of Christ. We are here on earth as stewards, and our ruling authority in the future will be directly in proportion to our faithfulness today as God's stewards. The ones who demonstrate integrity today are going to be the ones who rule and reign tomorrow in Christ's kingdom.

But there is also an immediate principle I feel that John is giving here. To the one who overcomes, authority is given over the nations by Christ he says. It is interesting that God delights in confounding the wisdom of this world, even in the marketplace. Jezebel of old said that the only hope of Israel was to compromise and worship Baal- that thru these practices Israel could become strong and mighty. What happened? The worship of Baal crippled the nation until Israel fell into captivity prematurely, long before the ones who were more faithful to the Lord in Judah. John's Jezebel said, you must enthusiastically participate in these trade guilds and in their immoral practices in order to be successful in business. John countered by calling her a false prophetess and urging the people to be faithful to the Lord in their business practices. History would demonstrate the wisdom of John's approach, for in time the integrity of Christians would completely change that Roman Empire. Christians would end up ruling it and it was only when they allowed the gospel to be compromised that the empire would collapse and fall. Not all of these people in the church of Thyatira saw the reward of their faithfulness, but their children and grandchildren benefited from their integrity.

The same principle remains true today. Happily, we are not in a situation where our unions or business organizations force us into practices that violate our faith- so we can join them without violating our Biblical principles. But we are continuously faced with subtle compromising situations. The enemy says that personal compromise is the only way to success. God just watches as the one who searches the hearts and minds of those who are his. And to his children who remain people of integrity before him, God

promises his blessing. The greatest blessing of all is that they will be given the morning star (vs. 28). The morning star is none other than Jesus Christ himself. Rev. 22:16 says "I Jesus have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright and Morning Star." What a blessing it is to have a relationship with Christ that surpasses anything that can be imagined. The overcomer knows that. But Christ also promises to him authority, success, and blessing.