



THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA
You Say You Love Me
Revelation 2:18-29

The Church at Canyon Creek, Austin, Texas
©Monty Watson – February 4, 2018

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The chameleon is one of the coolest animals on the planet.¹ For one thing, he's laid back and never in a hurry. And, a chameleon's skin is made of nanocrystals that change color to blend in with the environment. In the wild, this is to hide from predators. But when he's feeling wild, this is how he attracts the ladies. The chameleon has become a metaphor for giving in to peer pressure, for going along with the crowd. All of us have faced those times, when we were like the chameleon. Going along with the crowd, laughing at the joke, or doing what everyone else was doing. The problem is that when we do that, we compromise who we are. Being a chameleon is changing your identity and compromising your values in order to fit it.

I remember doing this in college. My dad died when I was a teenager, and after that, I had an off and on relationship with God. During my sophomore year of college, I was walking in the quad on the campus of Louisiana Tech University. The quad was the center of the campus where four major sidewalks intersected. What happened that day showed me that I was living a double life. I was walking toward the quad, and a couple of my fraternity buddies were walking toward me on one sidewalk and a couple of my Christian friends were coming toward me from another sidewalk. In a matter of seconds, we were all going to meet at the intersection of the quad. And I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure how to act. Should I act like I did with my fraternity buddies or act like I did with my Christian friends? I wanted to turn around and head the other direction, but it was too late. I was forced to make up mind in a matter of seconds.

I'm not sure how I acted, but I do remember the impact that moment had on me. God allowed me to see a picture of myself. Two sets of friends represented the choice I had to make. And the choice was so obvious. I did not want to be the person I was when I hung out with my fraternity buddies. I wanted to be the kind of person I was when I hung out with my Christian friends. In the middle of the Louisiana Tech campus, I came face to face with a choice, and that day I made my choice. I decided which path I was going to take and what kind of person I wanted to become. And, as you know, that's not a one-time decision you make in college. It's a decision you have to make day after day after day.

One of our high school girls said, "Doing the opposite thing as the culture has definitely been a process for me. The thing that helped me was surrounding myself with friends who were aiming at being a faithful Christ follower too. But it's still hard to avoid the peer pressure and do what I know is right." Another of our high school girls said, "As a teenager, you're constantly surrounded by people who aren't making the best decisions and who are going against what you believe is right. For me, it's not hard to resist the partying lifestyle, because I just don't have a desire to do it. But what is hard is feeling judged by others when you don't do what everyone else is doing. And it's hard to find friends who have the same faith you do and who stick with it. And one of our high school guys said, "We have this version of Christianity in our school that allows kids to claim to be a Christian, but live the exact opposite way. Christianity is more of a title, instead of a lifestyle. I'm trying to pursue an authentic relationship with Jesus, but I feel isolated in school at times. When everyone else around me is laughing at a crude joke, or talking behind

someone's back, or disrespecting a teacher, the pressure to join in or turn a blind eye is great. Every decision I make comes down to whether I'm going to compromise my faith or stay true to Jesus."

All of us have moments when we have to make up our mind. About which path you're going to take, whose voice you're going to listen to, and what kind of person you're going to be.

And that's why we are in this series called ***First Love***. It's about Jesus being the "first love" of your life. It's about Jesus having "first place in everything" (Colossians 1:18).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus dictated seven letters to the Apostle John and instructed him to send these letters to seven specific churches. In these letters, Jesus encouraged each church and He confronted each church. As we study these seven churches, we must ask ourselves ... ***Could Jesus be saying this to us, as a church? Could Jesus be saying this to me?***

To one of the churches in Revelation, to Ephesus, Jesus said, "***You have left your first love***" (Revelation 2:4). What was true then is true today. We have a tendency to drift. If we're not careful, we become complacent, we compromise, we grow cold, and we just don't love Him like we used to. And when it happens, His words are strong and direct. "Wake up! ... Remember who you are! ... Repent, and come back to Me!" If there is any drift or complacency in our lives, He is going to confront it.

In His letter to the church at Thyatira, Jesus confronted moral compromise. The Christians there were under pressure to fit in with the culture, and they gave in to that pressure. And if we're not careful, so can we. If we're not careful, what the majority says, or what the media says, or what a friend says, or what the culture says will influence what we think and how we live more than God's word does. And the moment that happens is the moment we start down the path of moral compromise.

As I studied this passage this week, a haunting question kept coming to mind. When I read Jesus' letter to the Christians in Thyatira, it was as if He were saying, "***You say you love Me, so why are you doing things that break My heart?***" Could Jesus be saying that to us? Could Jesus be saying that to you or me?

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA

Revelation 2:18 begins Jesus' letter to the church at Thyatira. "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this ..." (Revelation 2:18. NAS). Jesus is called the "Son of God," and described in such an intense, dazzling, and brilliant way. There is no doubt, this is the Son of God speaking.

And He is speaking to the believers at Thyatira. Thyatira was first established as a military garrison for the soldiers of Alexander the Great. In the first century, it was a small manufacturing town, a blue-collar town known for manufacturing textiles and garments, for brass and leather goods, and for metal works of all kinds. Thyatira was also famous for the color purple. The madder root was used to produce a world-famous purple dye. The Bible mentions "a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics." She heard Paul preach the Gospel and was

one of the first Christians in Thyatira.² Because manufacturing was so prominent in the town, so were trade guilds. Trade guilds were like labor unions. To work in a trade, a person had to belong to the trade guild. And, each trade guild had its own patron deity. So, not only was it mandatory for a worker to belong to a trade guild, it was also mandatory for the worker to worship that god. The chief god of Thyatira was the sun god Apollo, the son of Zeus. He was called the “God of Light” and the “Son of God.” Sound familiar?

It was hard to be a Christian in Thyatira, and that’s why Jesus encouraged them. He began with this compliment. “I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first” (Revelation 2:19, NAS). The Christians at Thyatira were growing in their love, their faith, their service, and in their perseverance. What a compliment! Sounds like a model church.

But Jesus also confronted the church. “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” (Revelation 2:20, NAS). This church was doing good in many ways, but it was also tolerating a woman who was leading people astray. She was a self-designated prophetess. So powerful, it seems, that church leaders would not confront her. They left her alone.

How was she leading believers astray? This Jezebel told people they could worship God and worship the god of the trade guild too. Again, each trade guild had its own patron deity. Part of belonging to the trade guild was attending the lavish parties and participating in promiscuous entertainment, and it was all a part of worshiping their pagan god. It was labor union meets frat house. It was like Las Vegas where anything goes. This posed a dilemma for Christians. How could they participate in that and worship God at the same time? Jezebel said no big deal. One could do both. You’ve got to fit in if you want friends. If you don’t go along with the crowd, you might lose your job. It’s feeling pressure to go to the party at the business convention. It’s feeling the pressure to go to the party after the high school football game. It’s feeling pressure to fit in and go along with the crowd. And the Jezebel in Thyatira told Christians they could get drunk on Saturday night and sing on Sunday morning, and it was no big deal. It was a theology of compromise.

To which Jesus says, ***“You say you love Me, so why are you doing things that break My heart?”*** Could Jesus be saying that to you or me?

The Jezebel of Thyatira was a first century version of Queen Jezebel in the Old Testament. The king of Israel was Ahab and he married a pagan woman named Jezebel, and she had him wrapped around her finger. So much so, that King Ahab built a temple to her god Baal and erected pagan altars throughout Israel. The king of Israel allowed Baal worship to become the national religion in Israel! “Because Jezebel his wife incited him” (1 Kings 21:25, NAS). And the Bible says, King Ahab “did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30, NAS). Jezebel was responsible for leading an entire nation away from God, and that’s the sin of the Jezebel in Thyatira too.

The prophet Elijah warned Ahab, but he would not listen. So the Lord punished Israel with a drought for three years.³ In her anger, Jezebel ordered the prophets of Israel to be killed. One of

the prophets, Obadiah, was able to hide one hundred of the prophets in a cave. Jezebel wanted to silence the voice of God.

Elijah, on God's behalf, confronted Ahab again. This time with a challenge. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a showdown. So 850 prophets of Baal met Elijah on Mount Carmel to see whose God was real. The prophets of Baal cried out to their gods for hours to send fire from heaven and consume the altar, but nothing happened. Then Elijah called out to his God, the one true God, and fire fell from heaven and consumed the altar. "When the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and said, 'The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!'" (1 Kings 18:39). Then Elijah ordered all the prophets of Baal to be killed.

Queen Jezebel was so furious that she ordered an assassination squad to hunt down Elijah and kill him. But the Lord protected Elijah, and here's what happened to Jezebel. She was thrown out of a window, trampled under horses, and her body was eaten by dogs.⁴

God's punishment was severe on Queen Jezebel, and Jesus promised punishment would be severe on the Jezebel in Thyatira as well. "I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds" (Revelation 2:21-22, NAS). This is how serious Jesus is about moral compromise.

"But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them – I place no other burden on you. Nevertheless what you have, **hold fast** until I come" (Revelation 2:24-25, NAS). "Hold fast."⁵ Hold on to your convictions; don't stop believing.⁶ Hold on to what is good; don't compromise morally.⁷ Hold on to hope, for one day you will see Jesus face to face and live with Him forever.

"He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations ... and I will give him the morning star" (Revelation 2:26, 28, NAS). "Authority over the nations," one day we will reign with Him. The "morning star," Jesus is called the "Morning Star." One day, we will share in His royalty and splendor and glory. So don't compromise that for some frivolous pleasure today.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:29, NAS). This is personal. Jesus is speaking to us.

YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME

Again, as I was studying this passage this week, a haunting question kept coming to mind. It was if Jesus were saying, "***You say you love Me, so why are you doing things that break My heart?***" Could Jesus be saying that to us? Could Jesus be saying that to you or me?

The topic of moral compromise reminds us of something else Jesus said. Actually, something Jesus prayed. The night of His arrest, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. As He spoke to His Father, this is part of what He prayed for His followers. "They are ***not of the world***, just as I am not of the world ... As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them ***into the world***" (John 17:16, 18, ESV). We are "in" the world, but "not of" the world.

We are very much “in” the world. This is where we live. We can’t avoid the realities of the world around us, both good and bad. And we are in the world for a reason. We have been sent into the world with a mission. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). As salt, we are to penetrate our world. As light, we are to shine the truth of the Gospel to the world. Jesus said, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15, ESV). To do that, we cannot huddle up and avoid the world. Jesus sends us into the world for a reason. We have a mission.

Yet, on the other hand, we are “not of” this world. This world is not our home and its values are not our values. Because we know Jesus, we are to be distinct and different. In Christ, we have a new Lord, a new identity, a new purpose, a new set of values, a new hope, and a new destination. Therefore, “Do not be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2, ESV). “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15, ESV).

Jesus’ letter to the church at Thyatira was a warning about moral compromise. I don’t think He was talking about a little white lie or a bad word coming out of your mouth. I think He was warning us about drifting off course and slamming into the rocks. Spiritual shipwreck is something that happens slowly and gradually and without notice, until it’s too late. It’s waking up one day and finding yourself in a place you never thought you would be, having done things you never thought you would do, and becoming someone you never thought you would be.

When Paul warned Timothy about spiritual shipwreck, he mentioned eight people by name – Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Jannes, Jambres, Demas, and Alexander. Eight men got their names in the Bible for compromise, for shipwreck.⁸ Timothy knew these men. He knew of their great faith and he knew of their great fall. Paul did not want Timothy’s name added to that list, and God does not want your name added to that list.

Sadly, the life of King Solomon is an illustration of compromise. The Bible says, “Now Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, *except* he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places” (1 Kings 3:3). Why would Solomon participate in pagan religious practices if he loved God? Here’s why. “Now King Solomon loved many foreign women ... (and) his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God ... (and) the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away” (1 Kings 11:1-4, 6, 9). “Now Solomon loved the Lord,” just like many of us, “*except* ...” What is your “except”? What is the thing that could cause you to shipwreck?

“You say you love Me, so why are you doing things that break My heart?”

CONCLUSION

What was Jesus’ challenge to the church at Thyatira? “Hold fast.”

“Hold fast” has to start with confessing any compromise in your life. If you’ve already compromised, if you’ve already done something you regret, you have to confess it. You’ve got to be honest with God. No hiding, no pretending. Allow Him to shine His holy light on your life to expose what you’ve done and to reveal the truth so that you see what He sees. Then, ask Him to

forgive you, and because He is a gracious God who loves you, He will. When David confessed his sin, he begged God, “I am so sorry for what I have done. Will You please forgive me?!”⁹

To “hold fast,” you have to say “no” to the world and say “yes” to God. To follow Jesus, you have to make Romans 12:2 a life commitment. “Do not be conformed to this world.” “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold” (JBP). And how do you avoid that? By being “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Renew your mind by absorbing the word of God. Psalm 119 says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word ... Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You ... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:9, 11, 105, NAS).

You can’t “hold fast” by your own strength. **You need the help of the Holy Spirit.** The Bible says, “Be filled with the Spirit ... walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Ephesians 5:18, Galatians 5:16). Willpower is not enough. None of us is disciplined enough or strong enough to resist temptation alone. We need the help of the Holy Spirit. And as you yield to His power and invite Him to reign in your heart, you will be able to resist the temptation to compromise.

But more than anything else, **“hold fast” means loving Jesus.** Love Jesus more and you will love the world less. As the old hymn says, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus and the things of earth will grow strangely dim.” That’s the point of this series. Is Jesus your “first love”? Does Jesus have “first place in everything”?

NOTES

¹ See this link for the video of the chameleon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioblgpA5eTo>.

² See Acts 16:14.

³ See James 5:17.

⁴ See 2 Kings 9:33-37.

⁵ The Greek word for “hold fast” is κρατέω.

⁶ See Hebrews 10:23.

⁷ See 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

⁸ All of them suffered the “shipwreck of their faith” (1 Timothy 1:19).

⁹ See Psalm 38.