



PEACHTREE
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

SEX: Sacred and Profane (Thyatira)

Sermon Series: Living for the City

The Seven Churches of Revelation

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Scripture Lesson: Revelation 2:18-29

This week I have been thinking of American cities that might correspond to the cities we've visited thus far in the book of Revelation. Ephesus, for example, that ancient city was a lot like Atlanta: bold and confident and on the upswing with chariot gridlock every morning. The city of Smyrna, the second city we looked at, reminds me of New Orleans: a beautiful port city where the citizens were experiencing suffering. Then last week we looked at Pergamum. Let's see if you can guess this one: a center of government known for its gleaming marble monuments. How about Washington, D.C.?

Stuck in Thyatira

Well, friends, today we drop in on Lansing, Michigan — a union town in the middle of nowhere. If you're from Lansing, I apologize. When I was touring Turkey, our guide did not want to take us out to Thyatira. He said it would not be worth the trip. I said, "Look, there are seven churches mentioned in Revelation and I am going to stand on the ground of each one of them." He rolled his eyeballs and we headed off six hours out of our way to Thyatira. Even in its heyday, Thyatira

would not have made the list of Best Places to Live. It existed primarily to be a buffer in case of an attack on Pergamum. It was a blue collar town with lots of soldiers and trade unions. And I can't help but believe that if the singer John Fogarty had been alive back then, there'd be a song titled, "Oh Lord, stuck in Thyatira again."

But one day somebody started a church. And what a church it was! Let's look at Revelation 2:18-29. If you're someone who loves outlines, each of the seven letters to the churches has the same outline. That is Praise, Problem, Promise. Now that might not be a bad way to review the people who report to you. Begin with praise, point out problems and end by making promises. That's the evaluation process Jesus uses with the seven churches.

This is the best church so far

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 (we're going to come back and ask, Why are Jesus' eyes like blazing fire as he speaks to Thyatira?) and whose feet are like burnished bronze. (Now he heaps on*



praise:)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.* (My goodness, this is the best church so far with all the virtues of the previous three churches. Thyatira has the active service of Ephesus, plus the love Ephesus was lacking, for they lost the love they had at first, and Thyatira has that love. They also have the patient perseverance of the suffering saints at Smyrna which Sharol Hayner spoke of and the faith of those sound teachers at Pergamum we talked about last week. And then, Christ tosses another bouquet, saying:)²⁰ *“And now you're doing more than you did at first.”* Remember, Ephesus had been great, but was getting worse. To Thyatira he says, “You’re good and getting better.” Wow!

“I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.”

But, we’ve got a problem!²⁰ *Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess.* (One thing I guarantee, her real name wasn’t really Jezebel. I’ve never baptized a girl named Jezebel. It would be like someone saying, meet my son, Judas. The first Jezebel poisoned that name forever. This was a woman who did what Jezebel did which was entice God’s people into sexual immorality.) *By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality* (the Greek here is porneo, porno—twisted or warped sexuality) *and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.*²¹ *I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.* (It’s never too late to repent, but this woman 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* (In other words, those who follow her will be spiritually 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 there were those who did not hold to it) *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 the promise:²⁶ *To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—*²⁷ *‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’^a— just as I have received authority from my Father.*²⁸ *I will also give him the morning star.* (Later in chapter 22, you’ll see the morning star is Jesus Christ himself. You’ll be a friend of mine, Christ says, if you overcome.)²⁹ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* Jesus says that on one level I couldn’t be more proud of you! You’re going great guns for God, and yet at the same time, you keep shooting yourselves in the foot in how you conduct yourselves sexually.

The last days of the Roman empire

The people of Thyatira had a double whammy. First, as a frontier garrison town with lots of soldiers, they had a booming red light district. But that was not the problem of most church members. Theirs was more insidious. In order to have a job in this union town of Thyatira, you had to belong to a trade guild. If you were a baker or a potter or a bronzeworker or any other tradesworker, you had mandatory union meetings which took place at a local pagan temple. The meetings became drunken debaucheries and orgies with temple prostitutes. After all, these Christians were living in the last days of the Roman empire, a time of the degeneration of society. Today we think we invented naughtiness. If you look back through history though Hugh Hefner is a lightweight compared to Caligula.

How we contribute to the climate of the whole society

Many people smarter than I have pointed out the parallels between the fall of the Roman empire and our life in America today, especially in the decline of sexual standards. Many people are so much like that population in Thyatira: bored, jaded, willing to resort to almost anything that will give a spark or a kick to life. And tragically, I do mean anything. Last Wednesday afternoon I met in my office with some of the leaders of Covenant House Georgia and the Salvation Army

who are on the front line of the struggle against the child sex trade in Atlanta. I'm afraid my instincts aren't very Christian when it comes to dealing with sexual predators, and by that I mean throw the customers and the pimps in prison and throw away the key. When I said that to the woman who may know more about this sordid subject than anyone in our city, Alesia Brown, she replied, "Pastor, our whole society is to blame for what is happening on the streets of Atlanta. We sit by and are allowing the sexualization of our children. Have you bought an outfit for a little girl lately and tried to find one that doesn't expose her navel? Yes, we need strong enforcement and prosecution, but your congregation needs to be educated as to how we contribute to the climate of the whole society that leads to the prostitution of children." Things got very quiet there in my office after that.

Desperate jaded people will do anything to feel alive

What possesses a man in New York to hop a plane to Atlanta for a day of child prostitution and, because of our great airport, get back home in time for dinner with the family? Isn't it a deadness in his soul? A demonic deadness? Sexuality has a kick that stirs the sense of drama and movement. "Ah, I finally feel alive." You were made for a sense of drama — but the drama you and I were made for is the drama of all dramas, the drama of the kingdom of God. People who have meaning and purpose in their lives are not so easily captivated by pornography, by twisted sexuality.¹ Our staleness of spirit sets us up for Satan in our lives. Listen to these remarkable words by the great English writer G.K. Chesterton: "There comes an hour in the afternoon when the child is tired of 'pretending', when the child is weary of being a robber or a cowboy, and it is then that he torments the cat. There comes a time in the routine of an ordered civilization when the man is tired of (nine to five, church on Sunday, Monday Night football). The effect of this staleness is the same everywhere: it is seen in all drug taking and dram drinking and every form of the tendency to increase the dose. Men (and women) seek stranger sins or more startling obscenities as stimulants to their jaded senses... They try to stab

their nerves to life as if with the knives of the priests of Baal. They are walking in their sleep and they try to wake themselves up with nightmares." ² Desperate jaded people will do anything and everything to make themselves feel alive.

But it wasn't just about boredom. As we all know, sexuality is also about power. To be on the "A List" in Thyatira, you had to show up at all the right places, be seen with all the right people, and engage in what they considered the right behaviors. This sounds a lot like the dynamics on today's college campus. If you want to hang with the cool crowd, you've got to meet some expectations not the least of which are sexual expectations. There is a novel by the contemporary writer Thomas Wolfe called "*I am Charlotte Simmons*." I am not recommending the book unless you have a very strong stomach; I couldn't finish it. It tells of a girl from the hills of North Carolina who goes to a major university and tries to live as a Christian. She doesn't make it. She caves in. Parents, if you have students in college and want to sleep at night, don't read this book. What it depicts is our own contemporary Thyatira.

But, friends, let me cut to the chase, and I defy any serious person to disagree with me. When it comes to matters sexual, less is more. When it comes to love, it's less experience that's desirable. How romantic is it when someone says, "I know so much; let me show you all the stuff I've learned." This is one area where going pro is not a plus. It is far more romantic to be a stumbling, bumbling amateur in matters of love. When you think about an orchestra, can you imagine a musician saying, "You're not going to tie me down my whole life to playing the violin. I've got to play the tuba some nights and some nights a clarinet or oboe and, of course, I'm going to go through my trombone phase." You guarantee you will never be a virtuoso — and you will always be mediocre — until you give yourself to one totally and completely and devotedly — to one and only one for the rest of your life.

I think of trying to live a sexually pure life in today's world as like standing at the free throw line in a basketball game with the score tied in the final

seconds and you're on your opponent's court. And God has set up this standard so high that you're not sure you can make it. And, on top of that, everybody around you is cheering for you to miss. They're waving their arms, and banging the noise makers and doing everything they can to make you fall short of the standard.

There at Thyatira they shot an airball. They missed the whole backboard. Led by a certain woman they got involved in the Roman orgy scene at the pagan temples. And here's what we must understand: this woman was a Christian. She was not trying to destroy the church, but she was seeking to help the church, just as there are those today in our denomination who are advocating a lowering of sexual standards. This woman was saying, "Listen, if the church is going to stay relevant, we've got to evolve our views to keep pace with a changing society." Only today, we can now look back in hindsight and see that instead of evolving, that society was devolving into chaos and the ash heap of history as we will if we follow in their pattern. That teacher was echoing the words of her society and ours today saying, "So, what's the problem? It's no big deal. It's only sex."

The spiritual meaning of our sexuality

I once saw materials used in an elementary public school that said sex is nothing more than like a sneeze — just another an instinctive biological function of the human body. The problem is when you isolate the person from the function the result is dehumanization. Today we teach the function. We teach the plumbing and call that sex education. 90% of everything one needs to know to be joyously satisfied as a sexual being you find in the Word of God. You need to know the other 10%, but 90% of what you need to know is right here in the Bible. And that is the spiritual meaning of human sexuality. That is that sexuality is not just biology — **it is relationship**. Our maleness and femaleness isn't just a handy way to keep the race going. God did this in order to overcome our aloneness and to complete our creation in His own image.

It's dangerous to get too literal here for in Ephesians 5, Paul says sexuality is "a great mystery." But in our sexual communion, God has given us a dim distant glimmer of his own communion in the Trinity. For as God exists in perpetual communion within himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so God has given us this way of uniting two people in a life union. The two become one in an act that symbolizes an unbreakable, total, personal unity we call marriage. I love the old marriage vow from the *Book of Common Worship*. At the altar one partner says to the other, "With my body, I thee worship." So, if you think there's such a thing as casual sex, you're wrong. It is to be a personal, life-uniting act with a Thou whom you worship with your body.

When we lose the sense of the forbidden, we also lose the magic, the wonder and the awe.

I had a wistful moment the other day listening to an oldies station on the radio, as they were playing an old Beachboys tune from my youth. And as I listened, I became very sad over what today's youth are hearing on the radio. Listen to the words from this song from the so-called "wild" sixties: "Wouldn't it be nice if we were older, then we wouldn't have to wait so long? Wouldn't it be nice if we could wake up in the morning when the day is new, then to spend the day together, hold each other close the whole night through? Maybe if we wish and hope and pray it might come true. Baby, then there wouldn't be a single thing we couldn't do. We could be married and we would be happy..." How quaint to hear a song about waiting and restraint and holding back. Friend, when we lose the sense of the forbidden, we also lose the sense of magic and the wonder and the awe.

I'm working my way out every day by God's grace and I've repatterned myself into who I truly am as a child of God.

In a sermon like this we've got to push on into a delicate area and ask: what about those who parted on with Jezebel? What about folks who aren't real excited about their past? You know, there are a lot of strange, goofy ideas out there from well

meaning Christians, who say things like, “Well, you’ve wrecked your life. You’ll be miserable now.” Lauren Winner is a brilliant woman who tells how she came to Christ as an adult in her own beautifully candid memoir. She tells how when she became a Christian she heard preachers talk about two basic images: ghosts and scars. After living a less than perfect sexual life, you will have ghosts in your head and scars in your spirit. Lauren reflects on her own life and she says, “No, I don’t think so. It’s more like credit card debt. I dug myself a hole with some bad choices I made. And I’m working my way out every day by God’s grace and I’ve re-patterned myself into who I truly am as a child of God.” And today Lauren Winner is a joyous, happily-married Christian woman.

Turn our backs on so much in our society

But, of course, Lauren had to do something — as do we. What we have to do I saw graphically illustrated when we visited the ruins of an ancient church in Ephesus. They had actually built the baptistry so that physically, in order to walk in to be baptized, you had to turn your back on the temple of Diana which was located across the street. And that's what we must do today. You and I must turn our backs on so much in our society if we are to receive the grace of God, as did Lauren, and to renew our lives in Christ.

This is a very scary Jesus who comes to Thyatira with blazing eyes. Maybe he’s saying, “I can see everything that happens in the darkness.” But there’s more. What about those who did not follow the teachings of Jezebel? What about those who are just living life faithfully every day? He says, *“I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold on to what you have until I come.”* That’s so beautiful. To the others he says, “Live it up. Enjoy life. Revel in the pleasures of food and laughter and rainbows and sunsets and chocolate and friendship. Go out in winter and catch snow flakes on your tongue. Live each moment of your life to the fullest. For in all the world I’ve made these things for you, my child, to enjoy. Be my

guest.” I don’t lay on you any other burden.”

Finally, now there is the promise to the church of Thyatira. ²⁶ *“To those who overcome and do my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations”* Control yourself in this life and I will give you control over nations in the next world.

Turn away from the cheap thrills of the world and I'll give you a life of real pleasure

And Christ keeps promising and promising and doesn’t stop until he’s offered them the morning star! In Revelation 22:16, Jesus says, *“I am the bright morning star.”* He says, “I will give you the morning star.” So, here’s our package: Reject Jezebel and you’ll receive me. Turn away from the cheap thrills of the world and I’ll give you a life of real pleasure. Don’t go for the deep things of Satan and you’ll rise with me to shine with the glory of the stars of the morning.”

So, what happened on our trip to Thyatira? We drove and drove and drove with low expectations, and when we arrived, they were met. It was an awful place. As we were pulling through this little town on the high plains of interior Turkey, I happened to glance to my left and I let out a yell. There in Thyatira are the ruins of a 10th century cathedral. They made it! Those Thyatirans worked through their problems. They stayed faithful and they had families and children who were baptized for generation after generation for a thousand years. And who knows? Maybe some of those soldiers came to faith in Jesus Christ. Maybe they cleaned up that red light district like we are trying to clean up the child sex trade here in Atlanta. Maybe even Jezebel got her life straightened out, turned her back on the pagan temples and is now up there with Jesus shining with the glory of the morning star.

^a Psalm 2:9

¹ Dallas Willard

² Chesterton, G.K., *The Everlasting Man*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1925



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