

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part 4: Thyatira
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Scripture: Revelation 2:18-29; Philippians 16:11-15

I. Thyatira Makes. The World Takes

“TRENTON MAKES THE WORLD TAKES.” This is the city motto of Trenton, New Jersey, which is illuminated from a bridge crossing the Delaware River. I crossed this bridge many times during my years at Princeton Theological Seminary ten miles to the north, though I rarely stopped in Trenton. In fact, I avoided going there as much as possible.

Trenton had been a major manufacturing center in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but like many other U.S. cities, the city fell on hard times in the 1970s when manufacturing and industrial jobs declined. The world had been pleased to take all they could from a city like Trenton in its heyday, but when the economic winds shifted, the world continued taking from Trenton, but it was manufacturing jobs, not products, that were taken. The city basically rusted and imploded.

When I think of Thyatira in the late First Century, I think of Trenton. It sat next to a river – the Lycus. It was about the exact same distance from the shore of the Mediterranean as Trenton is from the New Jersey shore – 50 miles. And Thyatira was a working-class city of Asia Minor, known primarily for its manufacturing. Like Trenton, Thyatira was not known for much else – though at least Trenton has the distinction of being New Jersey’s capital city.

Basically, aside from manufacturing, Thyatira was considered singularly unimportant. There were no noteworthy landmarks, no famous temples, no great libraries. Its city god, Tyrimnos, was just some minor deity who rode a horse and swung a battle axe. Thyatira was not strategic militarily. Sitting on a flat plain with no substantial walled defenses, Thyatira had been taken over by nearly every invader who had ever cast eyes on the area. Its only real strategic value was as an “early warning” signal to the two great fortress cities to the west, Sardis and Pergamum. Once Thyatira fell and people ran for their lives to Sardis or Pergamum, these cities would know to get ready for a fight!

In other words, the world only knew Thyatira for what it “took” from it – whether manufactured goods or news of invasions. Yet the sheer number of products flowing through Thyatira in its heyday was impressive. Everything from richly dyed fabrics and garments to tanned leather, from clay pottery to burnished bronze.

You may be familiar with one former citizen of Thyatira mentioned in the book of Acts. The author of Acts, Luke, wrote: "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods." (Acts 16:14) You can guess where her purple fabric came from ...

Supporting all this manufacturing in Thyatira were no small number of trade guilds. Thyatira had more trade guilds than any other city in Asia Minor. Like modern-day trade guilds or unions, those of Thyatira functioned as organizations that looked after the interests of the artisans and craftspeople associated with a particular trade. Yet, in ancient times, guilds did much more besides. They were kind of a cross between a professional association, a trade union, a cartel, and a secret society.

In this latter regard, each guild served a particular god or goddess who functioned as its patron. Each guild had its own particular initiation rites and feasts, along with distinctive beliefs, practices, and social organizations they believed led directly the success of the guild.

In John of Patmos's letter to the church in Thyatira, he makes jabs at some of these trade guild deities, specifically gods of the iron-workers, bronze-workers, and pottery guilds. In the letter, Christ is said to have feet "like burnished BRONZE," who promises those of the church who stay loyal to the end, "authority over the nations to rule them with an IRON rod, as when CLAY POTS are shattered." In other words, the God of Jesus is the ultimate authority, not the gods of the guilds, and the God of Jesus has the power to break a person free from their supposed authority and control.

Given how strongly other letters in Revelation take jabs at the Romans who were widely persecuting Christians, one might wonder why the trade guilds are more in the line of fire in the letter to Thyatira.

One of the reasons is because, for a city that was taken over by nearly every invader who ever marched their troops in western Asia, the citizens of the city felt no loyalty to the Romans. Roman demands to worship the Emperor as a god were apparently followed, but not with any particular seriousness behind them – much less belief.

What Thyatirans did take seriously, however, was its trade guilds and the deities of these guilds. "Thyatira makes, the world takes." If the only way the world values you is through what it can take from you, then the gods of the trade guilds who ensure your success in making things are not only your source of worldly success but your assurance of worldly esteem.

You could be forgiven for failing to make a sacrifice to the Emperor as a god because no one really cared about the Emperor anyway. There was little forgiveness for failing to

worship the deity of your particular trade guild. That god was lining your wallet and bolstering your sense of self-worth at the same time by helping you make things that the world wanted.

What self-respecting deity would ensure the prosperity of the guild if the guild tolerated those who refused to worship or serve it? What self-respecting deity wouldn't punish a guild for allowing certain members to claim it was a "false" god who didn't exist?

What were Christians to do if they were members of one of Thyatira's many trade guilds yet didn't want to suffer the abuse, derision and likely rejection of the very communities that their faith, their vocation, and their social and economic lives revolved around? Enter Jezebel ...

Concerning the church in Thyatira, John writes, "I know your works – your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. [i.e., you get the "Most Improved" award!] 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. 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; 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." (Rev. 2:19-23)

Ouch! These words are not only harsh but openly hostile to whomever this "Jezebel" person is. Hostile in ways that sound particularly repugnant to our modern ears. I'm not going to try to explain them away or justify them. I think John goes too far in his use of verbal pyrotechnics. Yet I'm not going to stand here in judgment of John, either. After all, I've never written a letter to a church in the context of widespread persecution, torture, imprisonment, and execution of Christians for their faith. I can't name friends who have been beaten by a mob, or fired from their jobs, or who have gone into hiding merely because they believe in the God of Jesus. I suppose that if I did, my letters might have a bit of fierceness in them, too – sometimes a bit too much, even.

What is almost certain in John's letter is that "Jezebel" is not an actual woman named Jezebel, but someone who, like Queen Jezebel in the Hebrew Scriptures, is teaching that you don't have to limit yourself by worshiping only Yahweh. This person is coming across as an enlightened spiritual teacher who is saying that you can worship the God of Jesus, but your devotion need not be exclusive. You can worship and serve other gods, too – like the gods of the guilds.

Can you imagine how attractive this idea would be? You could follow Jesus without getting into any trouble with your peers! You could go to church on Sundays giving

praise to the God of Jesus, then go to work on Mondays offering your devotion to another god. You didn't have to choose between Jesus and your vocation. You didn't have to choose between Jesus and worldly success, or between Jesus and personal safety or the esteem of the world. You could have it all!

Do we have Jezebels in our world today? Well, do you not hear the Jezebels of the world saying, or at least implying, that faith in the God of Jesus on Sundays has no bearing on what you do at your job on Mondays; that it has no bearing on what you pay your employees, or what kind of healthcare they receive; that your faith has no implications on how you vote, or how you spend your money, or how much carbon we all put into the air or the effects of that carbon on future generations?

The Spirit of Jesus in John's letter says of the Jezebels of the world, "I will strike her children dead." While these are incredibly blunt words, how is this any different than saying, "Those who don't think their faith has anything to do with how we treat the earth and its peoples will reap exactly what they sow?"

II. Jezebel v. Lydia

While Thyatira was considered an unimportant city full of unimportant people aside from the manufactured goods they could supply the world, the Bible has made Thyatira world famous, both through the letter written to the church of Thyatira in Revelation and through a woman named Lydia whose native town was Thyatira but was living in Greece when she converted to Christianity, making her Christianity's first documented European convert. The fact that God would care so much about people the rest of the world considered "unimportant" is a Good News message in and of itself. But there is more to the Good News than this.

Writes Luke in Acts 16, "On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us."

Given Lydia's connection with Thyatira and purple cloth, it is almost certain that sometime before meeting up with Paul and Luke, Lydia was a worshiper of the patron god of textile manufacturers or merchants. Her vocational identity and her religious identity – her devotion to her craft and her devotion to her god – would have been one and the same.

This raises an interesting question. When Lydia stopped following the god of her guild and began loving and serving the God of Jesus, did her conversion create any separation between her faith and her vocation? Do you think she believed that the God of Jesus cared less about

how she practiced her craft, or the people who worked for her, or what impact her craft had on her community and world?

Certainly, Lydia would have made a separation between her faith and her vocational life if she was a follower of Jezebel, but she was a follower of Jesus. In Lydia's world, this meant that practicing her craft was a spiritual practice, not just something you did to make money. The way she treated her employees was every bit as important as the prayers she made. The ways she treated those who bought her dyed cloth from back home in Thyatira, and those she sold her cloth to in Philippi, were governed by Jesus's command to love your neighbor as yourself.

A wise biblical scholar once observed that "Christianity is not a way of looking at certain things. It is a certain way of looking at all things." (Name unknown.) This observation marks the difference between the faith of Jezebel and the faith of Lydia. Whomever this "Jezebel" was in Thyatira, this person was teaching that Christianity was a way of looking at certain things, but not all things. That's why you could separate your faith from your vocation. But as a follower of Jesus whose vocation now served the God of Jesus, Lydia's faith affected the way she looked at all things, including how she made her living.

What would it look like if all the people who called themselves Christians in America were to see no separation between their faith practices and their vocational work?

Many of you know the story of Simba's Auto Center where I grew up outside Seattle, Washington. If you haven't heard it, you'll hear it now. And if you have heard it, bear in mind that when I told the story in a sermon six years ago, I warned that you'd hear it again and again until we Christians start living like the owners of Simba's.

Simba's was (and still is) owned and operated not by Christians, but by two Muslim brothers. Back when I was growing up, the brothers had a reputation for never treating not only your automobile, but you as a customer, with such respect, integrity, and care that you almost wanted your car to be sick so that you could get the Simba's treatment. A couple of years ago, I read some reviews of Simba's on Yelp and found that their reputation continues to this day.

For instance, one customer gushed over how he had taken his car to Simba's for a simple oil change. When he picked up his car he found that not only had they changed the oil but had cleaned his car and fixed a brake problem he'd been having – all without additional charge. They explained, "It just needed to be done"!

Many years ago, a friend of mine asked one of the brothers what motivated them to keep treating their customers and their automobiles with such high regard. He said simply, "It's really quite simple. We treat every automobile as if Muhammad himself will be driving away in it."

If it is true that Christianity is not a way of looking at certain things but a certain way of looking at all things, then apparently Muslims, who also worship the God of Jesus – at least certain ones of them – have gotten the word. The main question is, have we?

Do we follow in the footsteps of Lydia or Jezebel, worshipping the God of Jesus or whatever god holds power and authority over the job – or investment portfolio – that puts food on our table?

According to John's letter, most of the congregation in Thyatira was actually doing a better job at following Jesus than they had done in the past. While he singles out some who have not, he does promise that Jesus is capable of breaking the power of all the other gods that hold a person down. And to anyone who succeeds in staying free of these gods once their power is broken, he will "give the morning star." In that day, the morning star was a symbol of hope. In other words, what God is saying to any of us who may not be so proud of how our work aligns with our vocation, "Place your faith in me today and I will give you real reason for hope."