



5. Cuckoo in the Nest

A man was out of work, but finally got a job in a circus, playing the part of a gorilla. Every day he soared over the circus on the trapeze, twisting, turning and chanting to the delight of the crowd. One day he slipped and fell into the lion's cage directly below. Though unhurt by the short fall, he was frightened by the lion and began to scream. "Help! Help! Get me out of here!" The lion came up to him and said, "Be quiet, you fool, or we'll both lose our jobs."

Faking it can have serious consequences. Last time we considered the church at Pergamum, which was being fooled by fakes. But being fooled by fakes can be damaging. You've all heard about the cuckoo. It lays eggs in another bird's nest. Surrogate mother brings up cuckoo chick as it's own even though chick is bigger. Eventually the cuckoo chick gets so big that it out-competes and may even throw out the other chicks. It's a disaster for the surrogate's nest. All the real offspring is stunted or killed. That would be a good picture of what was going on in Thyatira

We pass in our journey through the letters to the seven churches of Asia to the one written to Thyatira. Thyatira was a much smaller town than the others we have come across so far, but it was important as a centre of manufacturing. In Acts Paul came across a Thyatiran seller of purple dye called Lydia. It was a major centre for textile production as well as bronze goods. Manufacturing is not a new idea. The Roman Empire had a complex economy and goods were manufactured and traded. In fact one of the strengths of Rome was its economic stability and links which caused it to last for so long rather than its militaristic ambitions.

If you look back to our own history, we can see the same kind of setup in London in the 16th and 17th century – the manufacture of goods, usually through people recognized as part of a guild. Many of these guilds still exist in London and guilds also inspired trade unions. In fact in Thyatira, if you were not part of a guild, your prospects of employment and furtherance in life were deeply limited. Of course, the idolatry of the time was part and parcel of guild life. To function in an industry meant membership of a guild. Membership of a guild meant embracing the idolatry of the day. In guilds like the Freemasons, there still exists a background in idolatry. The major problem with Masonry is not the suggestion of crone-ism that come from a secret society, but that it uses pictures and practices that are both pagan and satanic.

So what sort of church do we find a Thyatira? At first hearing it sounds much the same as Pergamum. Here was a church where there was much to be said to commend it. That being said, there were things wrong and needed addressing. As I said last time, churches so often reflect individuals – we try to make place for two lords in our life. We have God but we tolerate something else too. Tolerate isn't often the word. Why do we let things into our personal lives or into the life of the church that are clearly not the mind and will of God? Because it suits US to. And that's sin.

And here's a church that much could be said for its faithfulness. *'The Son of God, whose eyes are like flaming fire and whose feet are like glowing bronze, says this: 'I know your works—your love, faithfulness, service, and endurance—and that your last works are greater than the first. But I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and who teaches and leads my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refused to repent of her immorality.'*

Like Pergamum, it was more than a Smyrna. It was even more of an Ephesus: they were known for their love, faithfulness, service and endurance. Ephesus had left their first love. But like Pergamum, in not being legalistic, they had fallen into the trap of allowing false teaching into the church. From what we read here, it was the same sort of false teaching that had polluted Pergamum – a toleration of idolatry and a tendency to immoral living.

So why is Jesus repeating Himself to Thyatira? Because there is more than a subtle difference between Thyatira and Pergamum. There had been persecution in Pergamum and you can understand why some believers may have compromised to save their necks and possibly even thought that by compromising a bit, that they might improve the church's image and their image and avoid persecution. But in satan's seat, compromise was compromise with satan.

In Thyatira, there was no persecution. They chose a course of toleration of the world entering into their personal lives and the life of the fellowship. And what's more, they let someone and allowed them to influence the fellowship, even though the woman prophetess (compared to Jezebel) was probably not a believer. The use of the name Jezebel by Jesus tells us what was happening. Jezebel was married to King Ahab in the time of Elijah. She was a Pheonician and she was married to Ahab as part of a deal with Ethbaal, King of Sidon. Ahab was under threat by the nations around, particularly Aram (Syria) and he needed military help. The Pheonicians were also traders and an alliance with Sidon and Tyre was economically advantageous. In other words, it kept Israel safe and prosperous. In return, Ahab got the beautiful Jezebel who clearly did not sit at home and got waited on hand and foot – she was hands on and took Israel into idolatry and immorality.

What were the Thyatirans doing? The same thing. They were accepting the world's terms to prosper themselves and keep them from persecution. They had even allowed a woman prophetess in who by the way this is written suggests she was not a believer. Unlike the Ephesians, they were not discerning about what was taught to them and were falling for the same sin as Pergamum – except that the cuckoo was IN their nest and they were falling for her teaching hook, line and sinker!

One of the biggest problems of local churches in Britain today is that they have not only fallen into the sins of idolatry and immorality that I talked about last time, but they have done it without pressure and with their eyes open. It's not just churches – individual believers have done the same.

It's the half and half exposure to the values of the world. Like the Thyatirans, we are devout, we have persevered, we know the things of God, but so much of our lives is not under His control. We don't spend time enough with God, our jobs, our possessions and our human relationships take precedence over God. We readily accept the values of the world and our attitudes and our ideas are so often reflective of the world and not of the things of God. So why does God allow half and half churches and believers, where part of their life is compromised by the world? Perhaps He is tolerant? By no means!! God is long-suffering. Why? To give people the opportunity to repent. But in the end He's the God of holiness, righteousness and justice. Our actions have consequences. The Christians at Pergamum got the rap across the knuckles, but in Thyatira, things are worse and the message is – fool around with the things of God and the consequences are dire personally and as a church. Let's go right back to the start of our passage today. How does He address the Thyatirans?

'The Son of God, whose eyes are like flaming fire and whose feet are like glowing bronze, says this:

He's not referring to Himself as the Son of Man as He does in chapter 1. There He was the one who stands amongst the churches. Here he's the Son of God and the picture of the burning eyes and bronze legs are both pictures of judgement. The long suffering Son had long-suffered enough and judgement was going to fall.

20 But I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and who teaches and leads my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refused to repent of her immorality. 22 Look! I am going to throw her into a sickbed. Those who commit adultery with her will also have great suffering, unless they repent of her works. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts. I will reward each of you as your works deserve.

These words are aimed against her and her followers. She'd had the time to repent and now something awful was going to happen to her, and by implication to those who followed unless they repented too.

We don't like hearing things like this. We are happy to hear about God's love, but we like God to be tolerant and bending, whereas God is long-suffering but His patience runs out.

We can all read to the end of Revelation and see the judgement of the Great White Throne as it is known when God will mete out justice on the nations. But judgement here and now against our open acts of rebellion against Him? Somehow we don't think God will do that to people, particularly Christians. Well, think again. There's plenty of examples of Christians facing judgement in the NT like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 4 for example. Or the people that abused the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. And just look at the church of God in our nation. Or in our county. Or in our town. Do you think we've declined because we've been faithful, obedient and upright? In your dreams. Are we still here because we are spiritually superior? Or because in His long-suffering, is our God giving us the opportunity to repent?

I've focused for two sermons now on the damage that sin causes in the life of believers and the need to repent. Communion is a good time to get any cuckoos out of our nests, and follow Jesus. We all have them to a greater or lesser extent and Revelation makes us aware – and also reflects on the dire consequences of not dealing with sin.

For those of us who remain faithful and don't compromise; here's a message fro you:

'But as for the rest of you in Thyatira—you who do not hold on to this teaching and who have not learned what some people call the deep things of Satan—I won't lay on you any other burden. 25 Just hold on to what you have until I come. 26 To the person who conquers and continues to do my works to the end I will give authority over the nations. 27 He will rule them with an iron scepter, as when clay pots are shattered. 28 Just as I have received authority from my Father, I will also give him the morning star. 29 'Let the person who has an ear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.' (ISV)

We are called to hold on to what we have. We're going to explore a little of what this means next time. These letters weren't all doom and gloom, they were not written to condemn, but to encourage overcoming the world, satan and error.

Prayer.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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Scripture Quotes NIV and ISV*