

Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

Study #5: Thyatira—Is It Really Possible to be Holy?

Anatole of France wanted to be holy. He was inspired by Simeon Stylites, the pillar monk who in 420 AD dressed himself in a hair shirt, built a pillar 6 feet wide and 60 feet high and spent the next 37 years praying on top of it. Convinced that this was the best path to holiness, Anatole set out to follow his example. But alas, he could find no pillar. So he improvised by setting a stool on the table in his kitchen. There he sat arrayed in “sackcloth,” intending to live out his life in holy meditation. Unfortunately, his cook and the members of his family did not appreciate his lofty ambition. They made life so miserable for him that he finally gave up the project. He wrote:

“Then I perceived that it is a very difficult thing to be a saint while living with your own family. I saw why Jerome went out into the desert.”

Maybe you’ve come to the same conclusion. You’ve tried to be holy, but for one reason or another, you continue to fail. I remember my own experience in high school. I remarked to a classmate who went to the same church as I, “From now on, I’m going to act like a Christian!” “What do you mean?” he said. “I mean from now on, no matter what I think, do, or say, I’m going to make sure I do it like Jesus.” He looked at me and said, “You’re crazy. Why would you want to do that?” “I don’t know,” I said. “I just think that’d be the right way to live.” So I set out to live my life exactly as Jesus would. And I remember doing very well until I got home and discovered that I still had a little sister. And suddenly all my good intentions vanished. Why? Because as Anatole learned, “It is a very difficult thing to be a saint while living with your own family.”

In fact, there are many Christians who have simply decided, “It’s impossible! Sure, holiness is something we should all strive for. But as for actually achieving it, forget it. There’s just no way!” But then we read Hebrews 12:14, “Pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” And suddenly it becomes clear that holiness isn’t just a nice ideal; it’s an absolute prerequisite for fellowship with God. Others see it as not only unattainable, but unappealing—an unpleasant life of self-denial left over from the time of the Puritans. But that too is wrong. True holiness isn’t something dreadful; it’s something delightful! For rather than conflicting with our deepest desires as followers of Christ, it actually fulfills them. 2 Peter 1:4 says we are now “partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” So that our deepest desire now is to be like Jesus Christ.

And yet, the enemy will not allow us to enjoy the blessings of our new nature without a fight. This is the scene before us as we open our Bibles to Revelation 2:18. The church in view is the church at Thyatira, a group of saints who were washed clean by the blood of Christ. But rather than enjoying their new sanctity before the Lord, they found the devil resisting their every effort to be like Christ. And the question we need to answer as we study their experience is: How will we respond to the same challenges? Will we “hold fast” to what we have in Jesus? Or will we let the devil steal the victory from us? To help us prepare for battle, there are two facts I want to emphasize about holiness. The first fact is how it’s threatened.

1) Obstacles to Holiness

According to the Bible there are three challenges to a life of holiness—the world, the flesh, and the devil. In this study, we will look at two of them—the world and the devil.

1) The World

To understand what's involved in this challenge, let's learn two facts about the city of Thyatira. First, it was the least important of the cities in Revelation. Its biggest claim to fame is that it lay 40 miles southeast of Pergamum, the capital of the area. As such, it had one strategic purpose: to serve as a buffer against invading armies before they reached the capital. It should come as no surprise, then, that it had a long history of being conquered. Nor was it important as a religious center. There were no major temples in the city, just one small shrine belonging to a satanic priestess by the name of Sambathe, who claimed she could tell fortunes for money.

But there was something unusual about this city, and that was the way they conducted business. Several important industries had grown up in this town—ceramics, garment-making, brass-works—and to protect their profits, the business people organized the first trade guilds in history, forerunners of our modern trade unions. This was great for business, but dangerous for believers. Because in addition to setting prices and fixing wages, each of the guilds also tried to establish a sense of solidarity by adopting a common god and requiring their members to join in its rituals and orgies. And if they wouldn't, it could destroy their business.

Today we call it peer pressure or political correctness, and it takes many forms. Young people face it in the form of drugs and dress and the desire to be attractive. Business people may face it in the temptation to compromise their ethics to get ahead, to cut corners in quality to make a profit, or to sacrifice their commitments to family and church, so they can climb the next run in the ladder of success. Political leaders face it in the pressure to make promises they do not intend to keep, so as to please every interest group that offers its support.

A friend told me about a situation he faced at his workplace. The policy at the car dealership where he worked was to "mildly adjust" insurance reports, giving customers a financial break and creating good "PR" for the company. But as a Christ, he felt it was unethical. So he said to his boss very humbly, "I can't do this anymore." Not an easy thing to say when you are nearing retirement age and jobs are not plentiful. But he said it anyway. How did his boss respond? He didn't change the policy, but he did graciously offer to take over that part of the paperwork, so my friend would no longer have to violate his conscience.

Conformity. It is one of the biggest battles we face. E. E. Cummings wrote, "To be nothing but yourself in a world that is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."

How did the Christians in Thyatira fare against this pressure? Many of them did well. Jesus commends them twice in verse 19. First, He commends their works. "I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience." In the original Greek language, each of these nouns is preceded by the definite article "the," emphasizing how outstanding it was. For example, of all the churches in Revelation, this is the only one commended for their love. Ephesus, you'll recall, was rebuked because they had "left their first love." But Thyatira was full of love. And that, in turn, led to "service." This is the word from which we get the English word "deacon." You see,

some Christians have the idea that it's only what we feel in our hearts that matters to Jesus. But that is not true. Jesus says it also matter what you do for Him and His people. For He adds in verse 23, "And I will give to each one of you according to your works."

Second, He commends them for their growth. Verse 19 says, "And as for your works, the last are more than the first." We're often hard on ourselves as believers. We look at our efforts and say to ourselves, "I'm still not all I ought to be. In fact, I'm not even close!" So we hammer ourselves for not being like Jesus. You'll find this most among those who love Him best. But this is when we need to remember that what Christ expects of us is not perfection, but progress. In fact, there's a phrase I repeat to myself fairly often, so I won't hammer myself unnecessarily. It's this: "God doesn't expect me to know today what He wants to teach me tomorrow." I say that not as a "cop-out," but as a reminder that we are what we are by the grace of God and as a protection again the tendency to act as our own saviors. All of us should strive to be like Jesus with this understanding. It won't happen quickly or easily. It's something that takes place little by little over the course of a lifetime and is only completed when we see Christ.

So take a moment to check your progress. Ask yourself: Am I different today than I was last year? Or as Paul warns in Romans 12:2, am I letting the world squeeze me into its mold?

2) The Devil

In our last study, I described Satan's ability to transform himself into an angel of light to deceive us. That is what we find here. Satan sent one of his ministers in the form of a beautiful yet rebellious woman who began to lead God's people into sin. Unfortunately, this time they did not respond well. The Lord continues in verse 20, "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and beguile My servants to commit sexual immorality and to eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent."

Who was this woman? No one knows for sure. It is possible that it was Sambathe, the satanic priestess, who began to develop a following in this church. This would explain the Lord's warning about "the deep things of Satan" in verse 24. Whoever she was, two things are clear: 1) Her impact on the church was devastating; and 2) Her name was not "Jezebel," a name virtually unheard of in Greek society. Instead, this is a reference to the Old Testament queen who led the people of Israel into sin. According to the Book of Kings, Jezebel was not a believing, Jewish woman. She was a Phoenician princess whom Ahab married to strengthen his military alliances. However, Jezebel immediately and shamelessly incited her husband to abandon the worship of Yahweh and to pursue the worship of the idols of Baal and Asherah. She also persecuted the prophets of God and on one occasion stole the vineyard of a landowner by accusing him of blasphemy, leading to his death. For these evil acts, Jezebel met a gruesome death. She was thrown out of a window by members of her own court, and her corpse was eaten by stray dogs

It doesn't take much insight to realize that the "Jezebels" are still with us. Not only in our society at large—Shirley MacLaine, J. Z. Knight, Oprah Winfrey, and others with their New Age teachings, but within the church itself. I'll never forget a counseling session my wife had with a young woman. She'd been sexually active outside of marriage and wanted help dealing with the consequences. So my wife asked her, "Didn't you realize that what you were doing was

wrong?" "No," she answered honestly. "Before I did anything, I asked the youth minister at my church if premarital sex is wrong. She said, "No, not if you truly love the other person."

Even more dangerous than what this woman taught was her attitude. Do you remember Samuel's statement to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:23? "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft." I used to wonder how that could be until I realized that both witchcraft and rebellion are a rejection of God's authority in our lives. You see, this was a woman who had no fear of God! Just as Jezebel stood up to Elijah, "Who do you think you are tell us how we to live. By this time tomorrow, you will be dead." This woman demonstrated an ongoing, ungodly desire for power like that of Lucifer, who wanted to unseat God and steal the worship that only He deserves.

You say, "At least we don't have to worry about that happening our church! After all, we're all born-again Christians, and a genuine Christian doesn't care about things like that." No, I'm afraid that turf wars are one of the biggest sources of division in the church. Sometimes it's blatant and shameful. I recall the first business meeting I attended in a Bible-believing church. Right in the middle of the meeting, one of the members shocked the congregation by shouting out, "Pastor, you're a Hitler! You run this church like a dictator." Later, I learned why he was so upset. He wanted to be elected as a trustee or a deacon, and when the nomination committee decided he was unqualified, he chose to blame the pastor rather than himself.

At other times it is subtle. Little words of criticism placed in sympathetic ears about this or that leader's lack of planning or poor communication. But it always proceeds from one root sin—envy and an ungodly desire for power. 1 Corinthians 3:3 gives the progression. Paul says, "For you are still carnal. For where there is envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?" So if you're a control freak—just don't feel comfortable unless you're determining the outcome—don't sluff it off as part of your personality. Because it's not a matter of personality; it's a matter of carnality, and it needs to be corrected.

What if it isn't corrected? And what happens if a church is too cowardly to correct someone with a "Jezebel" spirit? Because that's what happened in Thyatira. Just as no one but Elijah was willing to stand up to Jezebel, no one in this church had the nerve to confront the wick woman among them. So the Savior decided, "I will correct the situation Myself."

First, He warns in verse 22, "I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation." The word "sickbed" indicates that there was a direct link between her illness and her immorality. Sometimes Christians get blasted for claiming that sexual immorality is the cause of sexually-transmitted diseases. But this is what the Bible warns. 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, "Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body." So, as politically incorrect as it may be, there is a connection between illness and immorality. But on the positive side, those who practice monogamy for life need never fear the terrible STD's of today. My wife recently went in for her yearly exam, and her doctor, who treats a wide variety of patients, asked her how many sexual partners she has had. When Cheryl said, "Just one! My husband of 41 years," the doctor seemed doubtful that that was still possible in this day and age.

Furthermore, Jesus warns them in verse 23, "I will kill her children with death." Jesus is talking about those who follow her teachings. But you say, "That can't include to Christians, can

it? After all, God wouldn't punish His children with death." But sometimes He does. Listen to Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11:30, where he talks about coming to the Lord's Table with unresolved sin. He warns, "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason, many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." That means they had died. But he adds, "When we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned by the world." So yes, God will judge His children even with death. Not for the purpose of condemning us, but for the purpose of making us holy. It's like that old oil filter commercial. We can pay Him now or we can pay Him later. But one way or another, He's determined to make us holy. So the best thing to do is to cooperate with Him and let Him change us little by little into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

2) Motives for Holiness

Why is it smart to be obedient to Christ? And how can that serve as a catalyst for becoming holy as He is holy? Let me list three incentives for holiness before I finish.

A. Fear of Christ

Proverbs tells us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." But here we find it's also the beginning of holiness. Verse 18 begins, "These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire." What does that mean? Verse 23 explains: "And all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and the hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works." The idea of having our lives scrutinized is nothing new to us. Traffic cameras, video security in banks and stores, scans of our email and social network sites, drones overhead—you and I are routinely being watched. But these are all hit and miss. In the case of Jesus, there is nothing we think, do, or say that escapes His notice. Everything is "naked and open unto the eyes of Him with whom we had to do," (Heb. 4:13), and one day we'll have to give Him an account. That ought to create a healthy fear in everyone who believes the Bible.

B. Compassion of Christ

In verse 24, Jesus adds, "But to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, and who have not known the depths of Satan, as they call them, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast to what you have till I come."

Isn't that a beautiful example of Christ's compassion? Recognizing that many Christians in Thyatira had worked hard to please Him, He now assures them, "I will put on you no other burden." In fact, what's the only thing He asks of them? To hold fast what they have until He comes. It reminds me of Matthew 11:28-30, "Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Some Christians make the Christian life more difficult than it is. They see it as an unending, excruciating effort to do as much as possible to win Christ's favor, as if holiness is something we achieve by our performance. It is not. Holiness is not something we achieve. It is something we receive by the grace of God as we walk in fellowship with His Spirit. In fact, from God's viewpoint, you and I who belong to Christ are already holy. That's what it means to be a "saint." It means that God has set us apart for Himself. It is what John referred to in Revelation

1:5 when he said that Christ has “loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father.” And it is what Paul talks about in Ephesians 1:6, where he assures us that we are now “accepted in the Beloved.”

So the trick is not so much to get holy as to stay holy. To simply be what God says you already are. That takes commitment. The word “hold fast” in this passage means to “hold on with all your strength.” Because sometimes holding on—when illness strikes, criticism arises, marital conflicts occur, or a job is lost—sometimes holding on is the most difficult thing to do. Yet that is what we are called to do. In fact, rightly understand, that is what spiritual warfare is all about—holding on to who we are and what we have in Christ when the enemy attacks.

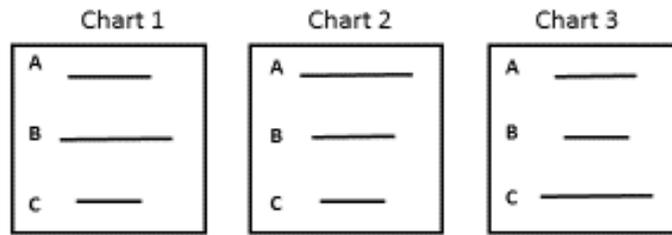
Consider at Ephesians 6:13. In verse 12, Paul reminds us who our enemies are—not flesh and blood, but the unseen forces of darkness tempting us in the wrong direction. So how do we respond when the pressure mounts? Compromise our convictions by trying to win the approval of those around us? Lose our tempers and strike out against those who challenge our positions, fiercely defending our reputations and trying to prove our point? No. A servant has nothing to prove and nothing to gain. Instead, Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:13 that all we have to do is stand and trust the Lord to defend us. “Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” Because that is enough. As He says here, “I put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have until I come.”

C. Praise from Christ

Verses 26 and 28 contain a twofold promise from Jesus, proving a double motive for holiness. First, He says, “He who overcomes and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations.” Do you know that that means? It means, as 2 Timothy 2:12 promises, that “if we endure, we shall also reign with Him.” One day Christ will give us positions of honor and authority in His kingdom based on how faithful we have been to Him in this lifetime. In fact, I like to ask people: What position are you preparing for yourself forever? Like the faithful slave in the parable of the ten minas, will you become a ruler over many cities? Or will you be made the future mayor of Mud Bay? It all depends on whether or not you “hold fast” today.

“And,” verse 28 adds, “I will give him the morning star.” What is the morning star? Revelation 22:16 explains, “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.” Jesus is the Bright and Morning Star, for just as the morning star is the first hint of a new day in a dark sky, so the appearance of Jesus will signal the dawning of a new age so glorious you and I cannot begin to imagine it now. But we will be there and we will see Jesus just as He is, and when we do, we will be miraculously transformed into His likeness forever. (1 John 3:2) Daniel 12:2 adds, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.”

Psychologist Ruth Berenda conducted an experiment several years ago to see how human beings react to the pressure to conform. She brought groups of students into a room, ten at a time, and then asked them to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on charts mounted on the wall. The charts looked like this—



But what one person in each group was not told was that the other nine students had been instructed to vote for the second-longest line. She conducted this experiment with dozens of different groups, ranging from small children to high school students. In 75% of the cases, the results were the same. The stooge would typically glance around, frown in confusion, and then slip his hand up with the rest of the group, claiming that a short line was longer than a long line. Why? Because one of the most difficult things you and I are asked to do is to simply “hold fast” to what we know is true. Berenda herself concluded, “Some people would rather be president than be right.” Which is frightening, but true!

What about you? Are you content to be who God created you to be? And will you “hold fast” to the things you know are right? Remember, Jesus isn’t asking you to do anything beyond your abilities. He is simply asking you to hold fast to what you have until He comes.