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 Revelation 2:18-29
 Sixth Message
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RESISTING DECEPTION

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

We return today to the Book of Revelation, resuming the study of the seven messages to the churches that I began the three weeks after Christmas. In the next four Sundays we will cover the remaining four messages. The Book of Revelation continues to be in the news. It even made it to the cover of *Time Magazine* for July 1st: “The Bible and the Apocalypse: Why more Americans are reading and talking about the end of the world.” This cover story was timed to coincide with the release on July 2 of *The Remnant*, the tenth book in the *Left Behind* series, which is “now available everywhere.” People are interested in Revelation more than ever before. But what they’re interested in are the seals, the beast, Armageddon and the millennium. The seven messages to the churches receive relatively little attention. When people do turn to them, all too often they regard these seven churches as prophetic of seven ages of church history, and we are of course always in the seventh age. This means that the first six messages have nothing to say to us today. But these messages are integral to the book, both structurally and thematically. They were of vital importance to the seven churches to whom John wrote, and they are of vital importance for us today. This is true even of the message to the church in Thyatira, of which one commentator says, “The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important and least remarkable of the cities.”¹ Furthermore, this was the only one of the seven cities that I did not visit last June, so I have no pictures to show you. Despite the relative obscurity of this message to Thyatira, I believe that of the seven messages this is the one that most closely mirrors the situation in Silicon Valley today.

A. The Message to the Church in Thyatira

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Thyatira:

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 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. I will strike her children 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. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come.

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations —

‘He will rule them with an iron scepter;
 he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ —

just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 2:18-29 NIV)

Since it’s been six months since we last looked at these messages, let me briefly remind you of their structure, and of their place within the book as a whole. Each message consists of the same four parts. First, a command addressed by Jesus to John to write to a particular church. Second, the introductory formula “Thus saith,” followed by a self-description by Jesus. The words “Thus saith” are the language of Old Testament prophecy, for Jesus is consciously casting his messages to the churches in the same format as God’s messages to Israel and Judah. The self-description of Jesus is drawn from John’s vision of Jesus in chapter 1. Third, the actual message to the church, presented as a prophetic proclamation. This in turn consists of two parts: a statement of Jesus’ awareness of the condition of each church, whether negative or positive, followed by Jesus’ resolution as to what he is going to do with each church in the light of such conditions. Fourth, each message concludes with a promise to each one in the church who conquers, together with a statement that all the churches are to hear each message. The fulfillment of these promises is found in the last two chapters of the book.

Let me also remind you that the whole Book of Revelation is a letter addressed to these seven churches. Each message, though addressed to a particular church and having particular significance for that church, is also to be heeded by the other churches. The themes of the messages will recur throughout the Book. This means we first have to understand the book in the light of conditions in these churches before we can understand the book’s message for us today. Sadly, too many popular writers fail to do that.

1. Thyatira

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: (2:18a)

Thyatira lay about forty miles south-east of Pergamum, the capital of the kingdom of the same name that, once captured by the Romans, was made into the province of Asia. Thyatira was a military outpost, guarding the vulnerable south-eastern approach to Pergamum. Itself in a vulnerable location, Thyatira suffered during the wars that waged across the region, as it was attacked by those seeking to capture Pergamum, then reclaimed by Pergamum and refortified to resist future attack. The city therefore had cause to be grateful when, twenty years before the birth of Jesus, Rome and its ruler Augustus brought peace to the region, inaugurating the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace. Thyatira’s military position was weak, but commercially it was in an advantageous location at a major crossroads. Once Rome had brought peace to the region, Thyatira thrived. We know from ancient inscriptions that it was a commercial hub in

which many trades flourished. We read of one of these trades in the Book of Acts, where Paul found in Philippi “a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira” (Acts 16:14). Already a “worshiper of God,” the “Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” and she became the first Christian convert in Europe.

Each trade in Thyatira had its own guild, in which everyone in that trade was expected to participate both commercially and socially. Here’s what William Barclay writes about the guilds:

They held common meals. These would very often be held in a temple and even if not, they would begin and end with a formal sacrifice to the gods, and the meat eaten would be meat which had already been offered to idols. Further, it often happened that these communal meals were occasions for drunken revelry and slack morality.²

This posed a dilemma for the Christians in Thyatira. Participation in the economic activity of the city required participation in the idolatrous practices of the guilds. What was Lydia to do if she returned home from Philippi? Forty years later, when John was writing to the church in Thyatira, what were the Christians to do? Refusal to participate in the idolatrous practices of the guilds would limit one’s economic opportunities.

This is where I find this message to Thyatira so relevant to us today. Of all seven cities I think that Thyatira is closest to Silicon Valley. We are not facing death at the hands of the authorities as in Pergamum, or at the hands of the Jews as in Smyrna. But most of you are involved in the commercial life of Silicon Valley. Many of you have experienced the tensions that this can bring. Full participation in the life of the Valley’s companies calls for sacrifices to the gods. Not the gods of the Greek or Roman pantheons, but the modern day gods: the stock market, the IPO, shareholder value, the bottom line. All around you are people dazzled by these gods. You are called to sacrifice your family life. Resistance to these expectations limits your hope of financial reward. How are you to keep yourselves pure?

What message does Jesus give to the church in Thyatira? Since “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” this is a message for Thyatira, for all seven churches in Asia, for all churches through time and space, and a very relevant message for us today, nineteen hundred years later and seven thousand miles away.

2. Self-description of Jesus

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. (2:18b)

The first thing that Jesus does is direct the gaze of the believers to himself. Each of the seven messages begins this way, as does the whole block of seven messages. Immediately after John is given the command, “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches” (1:11), he is given an overwhelming vision of Jesus. One or two elements of the vision are re-used in each individual message. In the message to Thyatira it is the eyes like blazing fire and the feet like burnished bronze. The source of the imagery is the Old Testament, but it is also imagery that is familiar to the inhabitants of each of these cities. In Smyrna the believers are about to face martyrdom, but Jesus reminds them that he is “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (2:8). Pergamum, as capital of the province of Asia, was the seat of the proconsul, the governor of the province, who wielded the judicial sword, the symbol of his sole authority to sentence people to death; Antipas had already been killed by the authorities for his faithful witness. But Jesus reminds the believers there that he is the one “who has the sharp, double-edged sword” (2:12). In

Thyatira as the believers walked about the city, no doubt they would pass many statues: statues of the emperors, statues of the gods. Some of these statues were probably made of “burnished bronze,” bronze that has been so polished that it glistens and dazzles. Probably this burnished bronze was a Thyatiran specialty. The tradesmen of Thyatira were dazzled by their gods, dazzled by Rome which had brought peace, dazzled by her emperors, dazzled by Caesar Domitian who styled himself as divine, as the son of God. But the Christians are not to be so dazzled. They are to be dazzled by Jesus, who, in imagery picked up from Daniel 10, is portrayed with feet of burnished bronze. Jesus with his eyes of burning fire, his all-penetrating gaze. Jesus who is the true Son of God. When the believers so see Jesus, they will realize that all others are imposters.

A side-bar to the main article in *Time*, offers a definition of The Apocalypse: “From the Greek word meaning ‘revelation’ or ‘the lifting of the veil’: used to describe evangelical-Christian ideas of the world’s cataclysmic end and the beginning of Christ’s kingdom on Earth.” The most frequent mistake about the Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse, is to think that its unveiling concerns only the world’s cataclysmic end. This book is so important for us today not because it helps us fill in our timetables of the end, but because it unveils present realities.

The Book of Revelation portrays the conflict between the true and the counterfeit. Because it is the counterfeit that is normally seen, John and the churches need a revelation of the true that is normally unseen. This revelation begins with a vision of Jesus, a vision of Jesus that orients both John and the seven churches. It is the vision of Jesus that orients us. As we go through the week here in Silicon Valley we become progressively disorientated as the visible world increasingly takes center stage and idols compete for our loyalties. This is why it is so important for us to gather on Sunday morning to be reoriented. We come together to center ourselves on God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We affirm that we are his people, redeemed by the Lamb, filled with the Spirit. The first thing that the Christians in Thyatira need is to see Jesus, and the first thing that we need is to see Jesus. And it needs to be a vision that so dazzles and overwhelms us, that it leads us to worship, as it did John in chapter 1.

3. Prophetic Message

Next, Jesus issues his prophetic message to the church: a statement of his knowledge concerning affairs in the church, followed by a prophetic pronouncement based upon that knowledge. Jesus’ statement of knowledge, introduced by the phrase “I know,” contains both commendation and chastisement. First the commendation:

I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. (2:19)

There is much about the church in Thyatira that is praiseworthy. Her deeds are fourfold, and are presented as two pairs, a pair of internal attitudes, and a pair of external behaviors that flow from those attitudes. Her internal love leads to external service; her internal faith leads to external perseverance.

But all is not well in the church in Thyatira, as, with the words “But I have against you,” Jesus turns to chastisement:

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. (2:20-21)

There is in Thyatira a woman whom Jesus calls Jezebel, whom the church is tolerating. Jezebel is presumably not her real name, but an epithet that she has brought upon herself because her behavior is similar to that of Jezebel in the Old Testament. We read of Jezebel in 1 Kings 16,

Ahab son of Omri did more evil in they eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him. (1 Kgs 16:30-33)

Jeroboam was the first king of the northern kingdom Israel after the division of the kingdom upon the death of Solomon. His sins, as recorded in 1 Kings 12, were to establish a compromised religion. Because Jerusalem lay in the other kingdom, Judah, Jeroboam established his own places of worship in Dan and Bethel, where he set up golden calves. He established his own priesthood using non-Levitical priests. He established his own festivals on days “of his own choosing.” Ahab went further than this. When he married Jezebel, a foreigner, she brought her Baal worship with her. Not only did Ahab join her in worshipping Baal, but this Baal-worship became the religion of the land. Why did Ahab marry Jezebel? He married her to get ahead. This marriage forged an alliance with Sidon, one of the chief trading nations of the day. For economic and political gain he sold his soul to Baal.

Just as Ahab's Jezebel led Israel astray, so the Thyatiran Jezebel was leading the Thyatiran church astray. Her teaching was leading the church into two sins: sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. Presumably she was teaching that it was acceptable to participate fully in the life of the guilds. Such participation, as we have seen, would engage the believers in eating food sacrificed to idols. Whether the sexual immorality is literal or figurative is probably a moot point: the two were closely associated in the ancient world, and throughout the Bible adultery is used figuratively of idolatry. By blurring the line between the church and the world, Jezebel was compromising both the faith and the lifestyle of the church. Jezebel is described as a deceiver, a role later played also by the dragon, by the false prophet and by Babylon. It is because there is so much deception in the visible world that we need a revelation of the unseen world where there is no deception, that we need regular reminders of the true, regular liftings of the veil. This is what the Book of Revelation provides.

Jesus' prophetic pronouncement, issued in light of Jezebel's lack of repentance and the church's tolerance of her, comprises a warning of judgment upon the guilty and a word of encouragement to the innocent few. First, the judgment:

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. I will strike her children 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. (2:22-23)

Because Jezebel has cast the church onto the bed of adultery, Jesus will cast her onto a bed. But it will not be a bed of pleasurable delights. Rather it will be a bed of suffering, a bed of judgment. Jesus will extend this judgment to all those who have been deceived into following Jezebel. Such judgment sounds harsh and uncivilized to us, but such judgment is a necessary part of Jesus ridding his church

of evil. He has redeemed the church to be his bride, not to be intoxicated with the world.

Many in the church would have looked like Christians, for they were active in their service and perseverance. But internally they were compromised. They were letting go of Jesus. As the one with eyes like blazing fire, Jesus' gaze penetrates deep. Nothing can be hidden from his penetrating gaze. He examines the hearts and minds of each person in Thyatira; he knows the hidden motives of each person in their interaction with the world.

But not all have succumbed to the teaching of this Jezebel. To these faithful saints Jesus issues a simple command by way of encouragement:

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. (2:24-25)

How are the faithful believers to remain faithful in a city where they are being enticed to compromise? The simple solution would be to give them a list of rules, rules governing permissible and impermissible behavior. But Jesus doesn't do that. He specifically says that he will not impose any other burden on them than the simple command: “only hold on to what you have.”

This language is similar to that issued by the Jerusalem Council: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:28-29). As Gentiles came into the church, there was pressure from some Jewish believers to require these Gentiles to become Jews, to take upon themselves the Jewish identity markers of circumcision and Torah observance. The Jerusalem church decided that it was the Holy Spirit's will not to burden the believers with such rules. Likewise, Jesus does not burden the Thyatiran church with rules. He doesn't give them anything new. Instead, he tells them to do only one thing, to hold on to what they already have. They already have what it takes to withstand deception and compromise. In the context of Revelation, what they already have is Jesus. The saints, redeemed by Jesus to be his bride, are to hold on to Jesus.

4. Promise to the Victor

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations —

**‘He will rule them with an iron scepter;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ —**

just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. (2:26-28)

As in the other messages, Jesus issues a promise to the one who overcomes, the one who is victorious. In the context of the message to the church in Thyatira, the overcomer is the one who resists Jezebel's deception, the one who holds on to Jesus. To this one Jesus promises to give two things: authority and the morning star. The faithful believers seem powerless in the face of the guilds. But in the end the tables will be turned. Since the quotation from Psalm 2 is applied elsewhere to Jesus, the overcomers will be elevated to reign with Jesus. Not only will Jesus share his rule with the faithful believers, he will also give them himself, for he is the morning star, so identified in 22:17. As with the promises at the end of each of the other messages, these two promises are realized at the end of the book. Christ's faithful followers in Thyatira are assured that they

need not fear what happens in the middle of the book, the seals, the trumpets, the bowls. If they are victorious they will emerge at the end of the book into the new heavens and the new earth. They might suffer economically, but as long as they hold on to Jesus they will overcome.

B. Resisting Deception: Holding on to what we already have

How are we to resist deception today? How are we to avoid compromise with the world? How are we to live in Silicon Valley without being sucked into its deceptions? For the past two thousand years the Church has wrestled with how to live in the world but not of the world. Some Christians leave the world, retreating to monasteries, but God wants us in the world as a witness to his redeeming grace. He wanted his Church in Thyatira, and he wants his Church in Silicon Valley. The key to resisting deception is to hold on to what we already have. More broadly in the context of the New Testament, what we already have is the Bible, which we hold to be God's word to us. More narrowly in the context of Revelation, what we already have is Jesus.

1. Holding on to the Bible

All Christians acknowledge the importance of the Scriptures, but many groups of Christians have found the Scriptures insufficient for living life in the world. They therefore add new teachings so that what the believers have is the Bible plus something else. Jezebel was doing this in Thyatira, adding new teaching that it was acceptable to compromise with the world. The apostle Paul is emphatic that those to whom he writes are to pass on the pure apostolic teaching. To the church in Thessalonica he writes, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess 2:15). To Timothy, pastor of the church in Ephesus, he writes, "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care" (1 Tim 6:20); "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Tim 1:13-14); "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim 2:2).

The visible church today is split into three major groups: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. Each has added to the apostolic teaching of Scripture in different ways. The Catholic Church, in which many of you here grew up, has added Tradition. This Tradition, which is the official magisterial understanding of the Catholic Church, is steadily expanding as the papacy makes official pronouncements backed up by the claim of papal infallibility. The Bible cannot be understood except with reference to this Tradition, and frequently the Tradition has been elevated far above Scripture. The Orthodox Church also stresses Tradition, but it is a very different Tradition. It is the fixed Tradition of the early church, particularly as developed by the early Greek Fathers. The Orthodox Church is thus caught in a time warp dating from AD 300-800. The Protestant Church rejects both types of Tradition. The Protestant Reformers sought to return *ad fontem*, back to the source, and that source was the Bible. Stripping away so much that had been added over the centuries, they summarized their understanding in the four solas: *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone; *sola gratia*, grace alone; *sola fide*, faith alone; and *solus Christus*, Christ alone. These were the four clarion calls of the Reformation.

But the Protestant Church, while decrying Tradition, has been very busy adding its own traditions. Sometimes these traditions take the form of rules: no dancing, no smoking, no drinking, the purpose of which is usually to prevent worldly compromise. But the apostolic church was careful not to burden believers with rules. Sometimes the traditions take the form of doctrinal statements which add to the teaching of Scripture, or which have a specificity that goes far beyond Scripture.

But I fear what is increasing plaguing the evangelical church today is the outright neglect of Scripture. PBC, whether in Palo Alto or Cupertino, has shared that belief of the Reformers in returning to the source. That is why we lay such emphasis on the study and teaching of the Scriptures. Scripture is what we have, and so I gladly affirm *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. In the Scriptures we have the gospel that proclaims salvation is by faith alone and by grace alone and through Christ alone, and so I gladly affirm *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus*.

2. Holding on to Jesus

I do not hold on to Scripture for its own sake, as if there were something magical about it. I hold on to it because it testifies to the Lord Jesus Christ, and so I hold on to Jesus. Revelation refreshes our vision, bringing Jesus constantly before us, so that we hold on to him. Sadly, this cover story in *Time* made very little reference to Jesus. When it did it was solely with respect to his Second Coming. One pastor, commenting about "the surge in End Times interest," is quoted as saying "people...long to see Jesus." But it is clear that he is talking only about Jesus at his Second Coming. We should long for Jesus to come, and that will be the theme of next week's message. But what we need is to see Jesus today. We need a vision of Jesus that so dazzles us that we will not be dazzled with the deceptions of this world, so dazzled that we pledge allegiance to Jesus, whether or not the words "under God" are in the pledge of allegiance.

To assist us in reorienting ourselves onto Jesus, we're going to close by singing two hymns that extol him. *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds* was written by John Newton, who as captain of a slave trading ship was thoroughly enmeshed in the commercial life of the expanding British Empire, profiting greatly at the expense of countless captives. Transformed by God's amazing grace in Christ, he became a pastor and wrote hundreds of hymns. *The Church's One Foundation* was written by Samuel Stone to affirm the Church's historic understanding of itself and of its relation to the triune God.

Jesus...my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen (Rev 1:5b-6)

1. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 106.

2. William Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (2 vols.; DSB; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976), 1:102.