

***All Things New: Hold Fast!***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Deuteronomy 10:20-21; John 8:31-32; Revelation 2:18-29***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Revelation 2:18-29. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and infallible Word. “[Jesus says,] “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.’”

Do you have a good grip? I don't. Maybe I would have been a better baseball player in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade if I could have just held onto the ball better. The monkey bars never were my thing. I see movies where people hang on to a rope as they're carried off by a helicopter or they're climbing to safety. You know where I'd be? Half a second, I'd be in the lake, on the pavement, flat as a pancake. I see these folks on American Ninja Warrior climbing ropes, catching on to ledges, vaulting themselves around. I'm like, are you even human?

But metaphorically, we do need to hold some things tight. We need to hold tightly to our spouses, to our families, not to smother them but to let them know we love and appreciate them, that we're not going to step out and hurt them. We need to hold tightly to our faith. When tough times come, the closer our faith has been to us during the good years, the more we can rely on it.

Jesus tells the congregation in Thyatira, “Hold fast to what you have until I come.” He'll deal with a problem they have in the city, His central message is, “Hold tight. Don't loose your grip, but keep hold of me.” We'll talk about that in a moment.

So Jesus has John write a letter to Thyatira, and this would have surprised the original audience for the book. Imagine if Jesus wrote letters to the major cities in Michigan. Where would He send letters? Detroit, obviously, huge urban center, a metropolis. Probably Ann Arbor, a center of learning. (We'll be kind to the Michigan State fans and say He'd send one to East Lansing, too.) Then He'd send one to Lansing proper, the center of government. Probably one to Grand Rapids, another big city. Maybe Traverse City or Mackinac Island as famous vacation destinations.

Now imagine Jesus wrote a letter to Flint. It's not a cultural center – the state website has three times as many cultural and historic sites in Owasso as it does Flint. Flint's been failing for decades. It's known for the automotive industry, but it sends its products elsewhere. Its biggest claims to fame are crime, a documentary decades ago, and the water crisis a few years back.

Thyatira was like an ancient Flint. Reasonable size but nothing of note. Not a center of the mystical arts like Ephesus, not a hub for worship like Pergamum, no massive library or engineering marvels. Thyatira was where the tradesmen made their living. Trade guilds thrived there by making trinkets and idols they'd send to temples across the Roman Empire. You went to worship and bought your statue to bow before at home, if they'd stamped them on the bottom, most would say, "Made in Thyatira," like "Made in China" is for us today. It was an unimportant place most people cared little about, but Jesus cares about His people everywhere.

Jesus introduces Himself to the church as "the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze." Jesus is establishing His authority to clean house. Jesus' feet being like burnished bronze is an image of purification. The artists in the city knew what it was to heat metal to crazy temperatures to get rid of the impurities. Jesus will purify His church. His eyes like blazing fire symbolize how He will examine them thoroughly, removing their stains so they can be pure through and through.

The church in Thyatira is in surprisingly good shape. This church is really something. They have all the great stuff in spades. They're showing grace, staying true to Jesus; they've been firm in their belief over time; they serve the needs of their brothers and sisters in the faith and the greater community. And not only that, they are more active, more serving, more loving.

This is how we want CrossWay to be described. Could it be said of us that we have grown in love and devotion, that we are doing more to reach others with the good news of Jesus than before, that we're doing more now than we did at first? Some ways, yes. I am so proud of those who invited friends to Trunk or Treat – we easily had our biggest year ever! We just need to keep at it. Paul taught in Galatians 6:9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." That's what Thyatira was doing, and that's what I pray we will do: not grow weary, not give up, but persevere.

But there's a problem: "You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess." Now Jezebel is not this person's real name. Jezebel is one of the most famous villains in Jewish history. King Ahab of Israel married Jezebel, and they led Israel to worship the Baals, the gods of the neighboring countries. Jezebel made death threats against the prophet Elijah and kept him on the run. Jezebel was a prime example of an evil woman seducing the nation into idolatry.

Now there's another Jezebel, a woman who claims to be a Christian, who's part of the local church. She claims to be a prophetess, someone who hears the word of the Lord and speaks them to the people. But she's not. Her teaching is misleading God's people into idolatry and immorality, and He's angered that the church has tolerated her teaching so long.

We don't know the exact scenario because Scripture doesn't tell us. But around this time, there was a popular cult called Gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that there were hidden secrets in Christianity, things that Jesus held back for only the apostles and the truly enlightened to know, all of which you could learn for a fee. They believed salvation didn't come from Jesus' saving death on the cross as much as it did from knowing the hidden secrets.

Now following Christ and becoming like Him is a lifelong pursuit, but the most important concepts of the good news of Jesus can be taught to anyone in about 20 minutes. There's plenty to learn, to apply, to understand, but there's nothing hidden you need to learn to be saved. Jezebel was teaching Satan's so-called "deep secrets," these false teachings, instead of salvation in Jesus through faith alone.

The Gnostics also taught that the spiritual world was good, but the created physical world was bad. (Remember in Genesis 1, God creates everything physical and calls it good, so this is a big red flag.) Gnostics believed that since the body was physical and therefore evil, you could do whatever you wanted with it and it didn't matter because it couldn't contaminate the spirit.

In a city like Thyatira, where idols were made on every street corner, were being part of a trade guild meant following the god they made trinkets for and participating in the immoral rituals of their worship, it would have been difficult to be a Christian holding tightly to the truth of God. Your livelihood would be at stake once it was clear you no longer wanted to make statues of Athena or Hermes or wanted to go to their meetings for "worship."

Jezebel taught, "What you do in the body doesn't really matter. You can make the idols; you can go eat and drink and be merry at the pagan ceremonies. What really matters are the secrets I've taught you." That's why Jesus comes down so hard on this woman. Because she won't repent, even though Jesus has given her time to do so, she and those who get enticed by her ways will suffer. When Jesus says, "I will strike her children dead," it's not her literal children; it's those who buy into her evil lies and spread them. Jesus cares about His church and what it says about Him, and everyone will be repaid (both good and bad) for what we do.

That leads us to one of our two major thoughts for the day: *we need to understand good tolerance and bad tolerance*. Tolerance is in fact good and necessary in a diverse society. Scripture commanded the ancient Israelites to welcome the foreigner and the stranger in their midst so they might know the blessings of God. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells believers they have to associate with immoral people in their community – it's unavoidable. And 1 Peter 2 encourages us to live such good lives in front of unbelievers that even though they might accuse us of wrongdoing, they might eventually glorify God because of the good we do.

Welcoming and loving everyone is what we do as Christians. We have no idea who God has chosen and what God will do, so we invite everyone to learn who God is and how He extends His grace and forgiveness to us. Different cultures, different politics, different outlooks all have a place with us. Even those who live in ways offensive or immoral to us still need to hear the gospel. Our worship is open to anyone willing to come and learn and grow.

But tolerance has a limit. Christians have to be intolerant of sin in our lives, first and foremost. We also stand against sin in other believers and especially in our spiritual leadership. There is no place for immorality in the people of God. It doesn't mean we don't sin; it means that when we see sin, we do our best to remove it. We lovingly ask those involved to repent, to change their actions and hearts and to turn back towards God. We speak out against it. We wage war against the sins that would trip us up and entangle us. We do everything we can to encourage holiness and purity and to get sin as far away from us as possible. If sin is disobedience against God, then to tolerate sin in our own lives and in our church is to stay in disobedience! That's bad tolerance.

This means that we have to be diligent at all times. Sometimes, we must be painfully candid about sin. We even have to be willing, if it comes to this, to remove someone from our midst who claims to be a Christian but refuses to repent, unless and until they come around. Not the person learning, not the person who wants to know what being a Christian means. But the person who claims to believe but refuses God's authority to say "no" to them.

In our culture, that is seen as incredibly unloving. Intolerant. Bigoted. In fact, at least one person running for President of the United States would have tax exemptions revoked for any church that doesn't actively support what God has said is sin. But this is not our choice. This is God's design for us, to live in the ways He made for us to live.

This is not about one sin or even a subsection of sins. All sins lead us astray from God and need to be addressed. Any sin we will not repent of is far worse than a sin we will turn aside from, no matter how consequential the sin is. Someone who unrepentantly gossips and creates division and strife in the church is in far worse shape spiritually than a criminal who is confronted with his crimes and goes straight. If we are not willing to repent, then being disciplined by the church is a valuable way to turn us back to Christ.

As harsh as it might sound, we do it for the spiritual safety of everyone at the church. As your pastor, it would be dereliction of duty to let wolves gobble up the sheep God has entrusted to me. The session is in the same position as shepherds responsible for this flock. This does not mean we become paranoid about sin or dredge up old sins already left at the foot of the cross. Not at all! It simply means we must never turn a blind eye at sin. Sin is like cancer; you either stop it as close to its start as you can and destroy its root, or it will grow and grow until it destroys you. May we choose to root out that cancer in our lives before it takes hold.

Moving on...Jesus doesn't want to put any other burden on the Thyatiran church except one: "hold fast to what you have until I come." That leads to our second and final major concept of the day: *hold fast to Jesus*. The church was doing what it was supposed to be doing – loving one another and the community around them, showing that love through service and good deeds, growing in the faith. The only command from Jesus for them was to persevere, to keep going, to hold tightly to what they had already learned and done and attained.

In a very literal sense, holding on can be hard. Keeping your grip on something can be tougher than it looks. It's not hard to grip the steering wheel when you're driving the car under normal conditions, but even that can get hairy when you're in the middle of a tropical storm or sliding down black ice. And faith can be hard to hold onto as well. When life is simple and things are going well, it's easy to say, "Yes, I'm a Christian." But when bills stack up or a medical emergency hits or there's a death in the family, when our boss hates us or schoolwork piles up and we can't see over the stack of books to read and papers to write, it's hard to keep a grip on Jesus.

But Jesus tells us, "hold fast to me." He loves us and cares for us. Holding onto faith and continuing to live as God's people is the only way to true joy and happiness in this life. Jesus says, "Don't give up on what you know is true." The people in Thyatira stood to lose their livelihoods by abandoning the ways of Jezebel, by refusing to make the pocket idols and to bow down to the foreign gods. But Jesus reassures them – "hold fast to me."

And here's the thing: *Jesus holds fast to us*. If it was all on me to hold on to Jesus, I'd never make it. I make mistakes; I question my choices; I have a lot of faith, but it can get worn down more easily than I'd like to admit. It's easy for me to forget my first love and my true calling in life, to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus. If it were on me, I'd be done.

But Jesus holds tight to us. God is not going to let us go. He has chosen us; He has made His people into a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Jesus has a firm grip, and He is holding to us perfectly, even when we lose our grip. Don't be afraid...God has got you. We are called to hold fast because it is best for us. When we hold tightly to Jesus, to His ways, His teachings, His love, we are in far better shape. We can wander through life worried and anxious and upset, convinced it's all on us, or we can hold tight to Jesus and know that we are loved and saved and chosen and live from that place of blessing.

Finally, Jesus makes His promises to those who overcome and persevere. He tells us that we will have authority – we will reign with Christ in His Kingdom. We are not just servants of the Most High God. We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, says Paul in Romans 8:17. If we share in His sufferings, we will share in His glory. We don't deserve it, and yet we'll receive it! God plans to bless us throughout all eternity! The Thyatirans lived in a city with no pull, no weight, no authority, and yet that's God's promise for them. This promise is for all the poor and powerless – the day is coming where we will not be downtrodden but reign with Jesus.

Jesus last comment – "I will also give him the morning star." What is the morning star? As we'll learn in Revelation 22:16 - the morning star is Jesus. Jesus will give us Himself. Life in eternity is not about clouds and harps. It's about belonging to Jesus and Jesus belonging to us. Everyone who perseveres will have a personal close relationship with Jesus that is blessed and fulfilling. The One we have come to love will be with us forever, will be ours forever. That's worth our perseverance. That's worth the troubles of this world.

As Jesus closes, so too I'll close for today. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." May God give us those ears that we may understand and live a life of pleasing perseverance before the Lord.