

Intro

So, my wife and I just recently finished watching “The Good Place”. Which, if you don’t know if about a group of people who die and end up in the afterlife which has both a “good” place and a “bad” place. And, as the title indicates, these people are all in the good place. But right off the bat there’s a hitch. One of them isn’t supposed to be there because she, by her own admission, was definitely NOT good. She enlists the help of a philosopher to help her get “good” enough so no one will notice. And we loved this show because it didn’t just gloss over everything as good or bad, right or wrong. It really dug into the depths of how we make decisions. One of the thought experiments they often referenced was “the trolley problem”. Now this has several different situations associated with it but it goes like this: Picture a trolley racing down a hill on a track, the brakes are busted, and up ahead there is a split in the track. You are controlling the trolley and have to choose. On the left there is a kid playing on the track and on the right are 5 adults having an afternoon stroll. There is nothing you can do to make them move. Which way do you direct the trolley? If you do nothing, the 5 will be hit. So do you do nothing and allow 5 to die, or intervene and **by your actions** kill 1?

Now, I know for certain that I have no idea what any one of you would choose. And that’s because this is a situation in which your life experience, spiritual beliefs, and even just general outlook on life impact what you would decide. Because really, there isn’t a good or right choice. There are times in life where we can feel like this, like we are faced with an impossible decision. Like no matter what we decide someone is going to judge us for making the wrong decision. Major life decisions can often be miserable and anxiety laden. Especially when they feel morally ambiguous. Because that fear of how others will view us on the other side of it can be paralyzing. And these times of life are when I sometimes wish to be a kid again, you know when everything was black and white. But the older we get the more we see things in shades of grey.

BUT the good news is this: We have a God who judges our hearts and minds and sees into the innermost parts of our soul. HE is the one who knows why we made the decision that we did. I’m not saying that that makes it instantaneously easier but it sets the standard for how we should treat each other. And since we are not God, we need to approach each other with grace, accountability and honesty. Knowing that God sees our hearts and minds is what can help lead us into a deeper relationship with God, each other, and help us make these tough decisions.

Let’s stand and continue worshipping the God who knows our hearts and loves us through it all.

Message

We’re in the season of Lent. This is a time the Church sets aside to prepare to celebrate Easter. Lent is a season where we take time to interrogate our hearts for sin, so that when we find ways that we have turned from God, we can confess that sin, repent and turn to God.

This year, our Lent series is called Under Pressure. We're going to visit the seven cities of the book of Revelation, to listen in to what Jesus had to say to those churches.

Those seven cities were all in the Roman province of Asia, what we call today Turkey. The churches in those seven cities all faced one important question: in a world that wants you to worship Caesar as Lord, who will you serve?

Jesus? Or Caesar?

These seven churches had seven different responses to "How do we stay faithful to Jesus in an unfaithful world?" And not all their responses were good. But for John, no matter where the churches were, no matter how they were struggling, they needed the same thing: a fresh revelation of Jesus.

That's what we see at the end of Chapter 1, just before John writes the letters:

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave. -- Revelation 1:12-18

Each church found the answer they needed in this revelation of Jesus:

We began with the Church in Ephesus. To the Ephesians, Jesus called himself the one who walked among the lampstands. As a church that had forsaken love for legalism, they needed to return to the one who is the heartbeat of the Church.

Then we went to Smyrna, where Jesus was the one who was dead and now alive. The Smyrnan church was staying faithful to Jesus and suffering for it - they needed the Jesus who had conquered death.

Last week, we were in Pergamum, where Jesus was the one with the sharp, two-edged sword in his mouth. The Christians in Pergamum struggled to discern true teaching from false, and needed the Jesus whose very word is the truth.

Today, we're moving on to the city of Thyatira, where a church really struggled with those tough decisions we're all faced with. There's a core question that forms the basis of many of the other choices we make throughout our lives as Christians. It's this:

How do we discern the difference between what we want and what God wants, or what is truly good?

And right now, is a perfect time to be wrestling with this because we are in the middle of the season of Lent.

I grew up truly believing that I would have a clear-cut list of what is the right and wrong thing is, no matter how difficult the situation. To have an exact rule of law by which we can judge ourselves and everyone else around us. Because at the end of the day how can we hold others accountable if we can't pass judgement on their actions?

I mean... that's how I, and maybe many of you, were taught

This is how the church has approached morally ambiguous situations for generations.

We have often been more concerned with judging people's exterior before we understand their interior. This black and white approach, while serving us well as youth, does not work for us as we grow. If we do not grow out of this mindset then we will become the fruit of its teaching. We will become judgmental people who care only about the behavior and do not seek to understand the person.

We, not unlike the Pharisees of Jesus' day, judge people by the ones they spend time with or the places they go and MOST of the time do not give a second thought to understanding their motivations. We don't give the benefit of the doubt.

We try to impose how we live our lives, in accordance with God, onto others and how they should.

But what if we chose to begin by viewing each other with grace? What if we could sit down together and talk calmly and openly about how we feel about super uncomfortable subjects? Could a pro-lifer and pro-choicer sit down and view each other not as insensitive, selfish, and evil but as someone who wants to make sure people are taken care of. Could we sit down with a person of the polar opposite political view and first assume they also want to improve this country we live in and not burn it down? What if we sought to understand a fellow Christian who goes to bars or spends time in places that seem to compromise their beliefs.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Revelation 2...

The church in Thyatira faced these same questions. Their city was run by trade guilds, kind of like unions. Anyone in the city that had a trade skill belonged to their guild. There were no scabs because everyone hired the guilds. This city had worshipped the Asiatic gods for so long that it was now integral to being in a guild. Each guild held regular meetings that included a large celebration/ offering to the gods. Now this wasn't like your holiday office parties where everyone makes small talk for 2 hours then goes home. These were gatherings that would involve lots of alcohol, feasting and sexual practices the Church considered immoral. All of these acts were integral parts of pagan worship practices - and they were sin for Christians.

Like the rest of Thyatira, Christian trade workers had to belong to guilds to work. Ancient peoples believed that if you took part in these ceremonies, you would be blessed by the gods. And if you're having someone build your house, do you want the guy blessed by your gods or the one who ignores them? So if the Christians refused to participate in the guild gatherings, they lost work. They couldn't put food on the table.

Some teachers tried to find a compromise - maybe it was okay to attend the guild meetings as long as you didn't *really* take part then you were ok. They advocated a kind of dualism. I can be Roman at work at Christian at home. My life at work does not really have to affect who I am as a Christian. That I can still love and follow God but that that's separate from what I have to do for work. This was how they figured out how to deal with this grey area. It was an incredibly difficult situation to be in, but, if you can separate the areas of your life then it makes the choice easier.

But according to Jesus, dualism isn't the answer. Let's hear his letter to the Thyatiran Church:

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Thyatira. This is the message from the Son of God, whose eyes are like flames of fire, whose feet are like polished bronze:

Jesus introduces himself as the one with eyes of fire and feet of bronze. The eyes of fire represented a purifying flame. They saw through all of the rationalizations or lies and into the hearts of his people. The polished bronze would have been through fire to make it pure and strengthen it. So the polished bronze represented the firmness and purity of Christ and his position on these issues.

So what does this fire-eyed, bronze-footed Jesus say to his church?

“I know all the things you do. I have seen your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance. And I can see your constant improvement in all these things.

“But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray. She teaches them to commit sexual sin and to eat food offered to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she does not want to turn away from her immorality.

“Therefore, I will throw her on a bed of suffering, and those who commit adultery with her will suffer greatly unless they repent and turn away from her evil deeds. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches out the thoughts and intentions of every person. And I will give to each of you whatever you deserve.

“But I also have a message for the rest of you in Thyatira who have not followed this false teaching ('deeper truths,' as they call them—depths of Satan, actually). I will ask nothing more of you except that you hold tightly to what you have until I come. -- Revelation 2:18-25

So this starts off pretty encouraging but pretty quickly turns into a scathing rebuke of their decision to let the culture of the guilds infect their churches. So yeah, it's bad. Like, suffering and death bad.

This Idea of dualism had become like a cancer in the church. The idea that you could live two lives dug at the root of what it really means to be a Christian. So it's not surprising that God was so hard on them letting Jezebel into their churches. This "Jezebel" was a female teacher in the church at the time. It was actually probably not her name but John was referencing a historical figure (like the 'Balaam' figure we met in Pergamum last week).

Jezebel married King Ahab of Israel. She advocated strongly for worshiping false gods in Israel - she built temples and established schools of prophets to these pagan gods. Not only that, but she hated the prophets of God because they said that the Israelites were not to worship idols. She ordered the death of many of God's prophets.

So this comparison was not a light, "hey, she's a bad influence you shouldn't listen to her" but more like "this teaching and culture will be the death of you spiritually if you keep letting it in". This Jezebel's teachings were tempting because the Christians were in a hard place: participate or starve. And that's an honest reaction! When we are faced with someone saying to choose your ability to put food on the table and remaining faithful to Jesus, we would probably take a long hard look at the consequences and maybe do some rationalizing ourselves.

But the thing is, while I can't see into your heart and you can't see into mine, God sees straight through our excuses, our rationalizations, and into our true desires. Remember that Christ has the "eyes of fire". He can see why each individual took part and what their honest intentions were. But from the outside looking in, if you went to the guild meetings that meant that you worshipped those pagan gods as well. Maybe some went and just sat in the corner while others took part in everything there. I'm sure it was an extremely difficult place to be in. To love god and want to worship him only but also realizing that in this city you could not get a good job without being in one of these guilds. I can also imagine the divide it could have caused in the church.

How does Christ's response in the verses inform both the church at the time and us today? What does it all mean? What can we take away from this? First, I think we need to realize that God is the ONLY one that knows every single one of our hearts, not us. And Next we realize that like that church, we are surrounded and bombarded with a culture that does not share our values a lot of the time. And it's not an outright oppression of our values but more of a subtle pressure. The expectation to drink at an office party, or to let some shoddy works slide, or maybe cover up an expensive mistake. Standing your ground in these situations can ostracize you from your coworkers and bosses. But this doesn't mean you shouldn't go to that office party that is at a bar, or be a part of a company that people have an unfavorable view of. Your HEART is what matters. And when you are in the middle of the muck it can sometimes be hard to know what is the right thing to do and that's where these next steps come in.

- 1) **Grace:** Grace is unearned favor. It's giving the other person the benefit of the doubt. This is the first thing that we must do when we see a fellow believer doing something that doesn't seem to line up with following Christ. We **MUST** remember that we cannot see into the souls of others like Christ can. This can look like sitting down to talk with someone and **NOT** having a judgment already in your mind. It means **NOT** talking about them or what you think they did, to other people.
- 2) **Accountability:** Part of the reason that the Church at Thyatira was struggling was because so much of the guild culture had corrupted the church that they struggled to know what was right. Some in the church were faithful; some were following the false teachers. They weren't figuring it out *together*. They had no accountability. And if we are afraid of conflict then we can end up adopting a sort of "Just don't ask about it" attitude too. We avoid anything more than small talk. But **WE TOO**, must have accountability. We need to talk with someone and ask each other hard questions.
- 3) **Honesty:** To me this is the toughest one. This means being honest with both your accountability partner and **MOST** importantly, yourself. We are pros at lying and convincing ourselves. We must allow God and our friends to ask probing questions to cut to what is real and true.

A great way to start our individual and church culture change is to be part of a Life Transformation Group, or LTG. This is a small group of 2-4 people that can be open and honest with each other about anything in their lives they want to talk about. Now it's critical that this group of people be people you feel completely comfortable with. Otherwise you will not be getting into those tougher questions and you won't be honest.

In these groups we must first give grace. If others feel like you're judging them first then they will never open up. Second is accountability, everyone needs to feel ok with asking tough questions in a loving way. Lastly, you **MUST** be willing to be honest with yourself and others, otherwise you are not getting to the core of your motivations and who you are.

There will always be times where we feel the tension between what is good and what we want. And sometimes we won't be able to figure that out on our own. We need the Jesus that has eyes of fire and feet of bronze. And I know that it is way easier to just say "don't go to places that might make you look bad" but that is a cop out. That is the way of taking Jesus' place of judging someone's heart. Jesus was judged because of where he went and the company he kept. Let's not be like them, let's accept this opportunity to grow into a deeper relationship with both our fellow Christians and our God. What we need is honest accountability and grace. This is a chance to change not only ourselves but our entire church.

Communion + Examen

[**Communion Slide**] We come to the communion table to meet with Jesus. As it was for the Church at Thyatira, our need in a confusing world is to know Jesus better. He is the one who knows us, who is steadfast and true. And so we come to his table.

At this meal, Jesus broke bread and gave it to us as his body. He said, Take and eat, this is my body, broken for you. After the meal was over, he gave us a cup of wine, saying, “Take and drink. This is my blood, poured out for you. Take and drink.”

You don’t have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us today. If you’re open to God searching you, knowing you and calling you to life, you’re welcome to come to the table.

Before we come, I’m going to lead us in a prayer of Examen. I’m going to ask you four questions, and give you time to reflect on each question. Make the questions prayers to God. After those questions, I’ll pray for all of us, and then as you’re ready, you’re welcome to come forward to receive communion.

1. When in the last week have I shown grace to someone different from me?
2. When in the last week have I rushed to judge or condemn someone different from me?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to judge or condemn someone different from me?
4. How can I choose to imitate God in grace and love this week?

God,

You have gathered us today to meet you as the one with eyes of fire and feet of bronze. We come from all walks of life, from a world full of shades of grey. We confess that, like your children in Thyatira, we are often confused and troubled as to how to follow you well. Like them, we are inundated with competing voices, all offering paths to life, power and flourishing. We need your eyes to see truth. We need your feet to remain steadfast.

So we come today as your people, gathered to your table, by your Spirit. As we receive these wafers and juice, we pray they become a spiritual food for us. Give us grace, open our ears to hear your voice. Open our eyes to see your truth. And send us into your world as a people of grace in a world of judgment. Make us a light to a world that wants to see clearly.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

Assignment + Blessing

“To all who are victorious, who obey me to the very end, ‘To them I will give authority over all the nations. They will rule the nations with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots.’

“They will have the same authority I received from my Father, and I will also give them the morning star! Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.” – Revelation 2:26-29