

17 October, 1999
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church
Mark James Toone

YOU'VE GOT MAIL
OVERCOMING IMMORALITY
Revelation 3:18-29

We continue today in our study on the Book of the Revelation. For those of you who want to work for some extra credit, the latest edition of *Christianity Today* focuses on Revelation. It is excellent work and I recommend it to you.

Now back to OUR work; we have a fourth letter to deliver. Four weeks ago we delivered a letter to the Ephesian church on the coast almost due east of Athens. In it, Jesus, speaking through John, urged them to rekindle their first love, their passion. Then we traveled due north about 40 miles and delivered a letter to the church at Smyrna. Jesus encouraged them to hang in there, to step, stop, and breathe, we said---in the face of the adversity they were facing. Then farther north to Pergamum. What was Jesus' word to them? Stop your idolatrous ways! They were watering down their faith, blending in a little Emperor worship here and there, and Jesus says, "Don't you do it."

Now we turn east and begin a swing that will take us back down level with the city of Ephesus. This morning, we come to the city of Thyatira.

Thyatira was a pushover. Unlike Pergamum, it was not built on a hill for protection. Unlike Smyrna, it didn't have a wonderful harbor that they could easily close in case of attack. They were sitting there beside a river, in a valley, vulnerable to whomever wanted to attack them. They weren't renowned for their fortifications, temples, theaters, or libraries. But they were known for one thing: Trade. They were a prosperous center of trade.

We know of one tradeswoman who learned her craft in her home town of Thyatira. When we meet her, she was living in Philippi and selling purple cloth. What was her name? Lydia. Acts tells us she came from Thyatira.

Like most of the letters, Jesus begins with words of praise. The Thyatirans are hard workers. They have demonstrated their love

and faith through acts of service and perseverance, and they have gotten strong as they have gone along. Encouraging words of praise. Then we come to the dreaded "Nevertheless...". "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess." Who was this Jezebel? That probably was not her real name. In the same way that Jesus spoke of the Old Testament prophet Balaam to the people of Pergamum, here he brings to mind a well-known, wretched woman from Old Testament history.

Jezebel. The name has come to mean a treacherous and conniving woman. But who was she? You will find her story in I and II Kings. Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, king of Israel. Ahab was a horribly evil king. Listen to this description of him in I Kings 21:25:

"There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols."

Jezebel was a treacherous murderess. She killed off the prophets of God. She arranged for the death of a man who owned a piece of land she wanted. But worst of all, she used her influence to urge Ahab and the rest of Israel toward the worship of Baal, a worship that included temple prostitution, both male and female.

Like the Jezebel of the Old Testament, this new Jezebel is leading the Thyatiran Christians down a path of pagan idolatry stained with temple prostitution and other sexual immorality. And Jesus condemns it.

Have any of you figured out what the basketball represents? It was a shock this week to read of the untimely death of an athlete who dominated his field sport as few have. Wilt Chamberlain died of heart failure. I am a little too young to remember much about his playing career but most of you do. How many recall his 100-point game?

Wilt deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest basketball players to ever walk out on the floor. But he will also be remembered for something else. In his autobiography, Chamberlain made an incredible claim. He claimed to have slept with 20,000 different women. First off, I don't believe it. Someone did the math and figure that he would have had to sleep with 1.2 women

per day from when he was 15 years old in order to accomplish that feat. So, let's imagine he was exaggerating. How about just 10,000 different women? How about just 5,000 different women?

If it is true, it is a detestable record of immorality and abuse. If it is true, it is a detestable legacy that, as far as I'm concerned, sullies all of his great accomplishments on the basketball court. And it serves as a graphic, should I say, pornographic, illustration to the theme that presents itself to us this morning. How do we who live in a sex-saturated culture overcome the temptations of sexual immorality?

First, we tell the truth. Jezebel gained her power over the people by lying to them. Verse 20 declares that her teaching was misleading. Verse 24 again condemns her false teaching which purports to reveal deep secrets. In the end Jesus says, "Hold on to what you have." In other words, I think he is saying, hold on to the truth.

So let's do some truth-telling this morning.

The truth is, immorality has serious consequences. V. 22: "So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely..." Too rarely are we willing to consider the price we will pay if we choose to believe the lies of Jezebel about our sexual activities. The truth is when we practice our sexuality in any way outside of God's divine plan---which is marriage between one man and one woman---we will suffer.

Of course, that's not what our culture tells us. How often do the sitcoms or TV dramas show anyone suffering because of moral lapses? They jump friskily from bed to bed to bed with no apparent impact emotional, spiritual or physical. But that is not truth, is it? In the first case, there are the very real dangers of STD's. There is now an AIDS virus that is resistant to the drug cocktails that have so effectively controlled it in recent years. That's not to mention the good old standbys like genital herpes, gonorrhea, and syphilis.

And what of the psychological impact? I have ministered to too many people who gave in and slept with someone who wasn't their spouse and ended up carrying a huge burden of guilt and shame, in some cases for years. Spiritually, it is one of the greatest barriers to prayer that I know of. When you are involved in sexual immorality, you cannot look God in the eye. You can't tell him the truth about

what you are doing. And it makes the rest of your prayers seem empty and useless.

Not only does it eat away at your relationship with God and with yourself, it's even bad for your relationship with your sexual partner. Did you know that the incidence of divorce among those who have sex together before they get married is twice that of those who abstain from sex before marriage? Not only do you bring pain and guilt upon yourself, you bring it upon your partner, too. I spoke to a man recently who, after 15 years, went back to a previous girlfriend to seek forgiveness for their inappropriate sexual relationship. That woman, after 15 years mind you, was bitter and unforgiving, even though she was now married and very much in love with her husband. The scars of immorality are deep and painful.

The truth is, sexual immorality is a particularly insidious sin because it scars you in a way that other sins do not. God created sex so that it would make an indelible impression. God created it as a "glue" that would help hold a marriage relationship together. When two persons give themselves to each other sexually, it is the most vulnerable and intimate expression possible. There is no such thing as casual sex. There is no such thing as a one-night stand. Because the memories and the emotional baggage that attends the sexual act stay with you for the rest of your life. What does the Bible say happens in the act of marriage? The two become one. Every sexual partner takes away a piece of your soul. Recreational sex is a lie and we must say so.

The truth is, our culture is sex crazed. We are being steeped in a rotten stew of sexual lies. Television is probably the worst culprit because it is so readily available to us. In the early years of the show, I used to think "Friends" was funny. I cannot stand watching it now. The focus of every show is sex. I believe I am correct in saying that every male character has managed to sleep with every female character. None of them are married to each other.

Furthermore, there is hardly a primetime sitcom that does not have a homosexual character and subplot. "Spin City," "Mad About You," "Friends." "Will and Grace" announced that it will make TV history with the first male to male kiss. And that's just the stuff on nighttime TV. I don't watch them, but I understand that the daytime soaps are as bad or worse. These are lies and we must say so.

The truth is, the very institutions we might hope to aid us in restoring morality often work against us. In BC, a Supreme Court justice ruled that child pornography should not be a crime because the laws against it violate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. "There is no evidence that demonstrates a significant increase in the danger to children caused by pornography." This is a lie and we must say so.

Here's some more truth. Handing out condoms to young people is not the answer. Sex Education programs that break down the God-given modesty that was intended to protect young people from sexual sin is not the answer. Now the typical response you will hear to such a statement is "That's naïve. Kids are going to have sex anyway so you might as well teach them how to protect themselves." But it is not true. Teen birthrates and sexual diseases have skyrocketed during the years we have practiced our present educational policies of safe sex. And despite what we are being told, did you know that a recent review of national data indicates that teen birthrates have been **falling**...not because they are using more condoms, but because more teens, especially boys, are abstaining from sex, according to *The Washington Times* .

Here is a last piece of hard truth: when it comes to sex, there's not much difference between those who call themselves born again Christians and those who don't. I wish that I could say things were different in the Christian community but they are not. Did you know that there is very little difference in the levels of sexual activity between Christian and non-Christian unmarried persons? Did you know that statistically, the level of sexual activity within a church high school youth group will be about the same as that in an unchurched group of high school kids?

The sad truth is, Jezebel is alive and well in the Church of Jesus Christ. Listen to me this morning. If this is your area of struggle, listen. There are very few people who enter into sexual sin who don't know that they are doing wrong. After a while, they may become numb to it. They may pretend that there's nothing wrong with what they are doing. But there was a time when their spirit was soft towards the Lord and their immoral behavior caused them guilt. Listen to that guilt. It can be the voice of God's Holy Spirit saying, "Stop what you are doing, turn around, go the other way and experience the forgiveness that you need to have."

Sexual sin is not the unforgivable sin. Did you notice that Jezebel had a chance to stop what she was doing, turn around and go the other way? Listen to Jesus in 21: **"I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling."**

I value this part of the text because it reflects God's patience with us as we seek to bring this part of our lives under his lordship. God knows how strong our sexual drives are. He made them! I remember well my struggles as a single person. You pray for God's strength and mercy and forgiveness. And just when you think you have control of that part of your life, you discover to your shame that you do not. And so the battle continues.

And I want to urge you, keep fighting. Don't let the lizard of immorality sink its claws into you. If you are a high school student who is thinking about having sex with your boyfriend, don't do it. If you are having sex with your girlfriend, stop, repent, ask God's forgiveness and tell someone who will help hold you accountable. If you are cheating on your wife, I beg you to stop and get help. If you are thinking about cheating on your husband, I beg you to go no further. If you are living with someone who is not your spouse, make it right. Get married. And if you aren't sure you want to get married, separate so that your heads can clear and you can make a good decision. If you are caught in the throws of internet porn, tell someone. Get help. Get rid of your computer; go offline. If you are struggling with homosexual temptations, don't buy into the lie of this world that tells you it is OK, that it is God's creation. It is not. It is a distortion of God's creation and you will never be happy if you embrace this lifestyle.

He who has ears, let him listen, let her listen, to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR
OVERCOMING IMMORALITY

Rev. 2: 18-29

Pastor Mark Toone
October 17, 1999

- Note the greeting of Jesus. When you know that the guardian deity of Thyatira was considered the son of Zeus and that this is the only instance of the use of "Son of God" in Revelation, what is Jesus saying to Thyatira? How do his blazing eyes and feet enter into it?
- This text emphasizes sexual immorality even though it is also dealing with idolatry. In what way is sexual immorality idolatrous? Why is it such a difficult issue to overcome? How has the influence of society made it more difficult?
- According to the statistics, there is little difference in sexual behavior between Christian and non-Christian persons. For example, the levels of cohabitation and the percentage of youth that are sexually active are very close between those two groups. How does that make you feel? Why do you suppose it is so? What must we do to change that?

Pray for each other. Pray for purity, for protection of marriages, for protection of children, for protection of our church. Pray for our influence on society.

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