

Revelation 2:18-29

Questions From Jesus To Faith Community Church *Got Idolaters?*

Over the years I've had the opportunity and privilege to travel to India on 3 different occasions. India is so unlike any other place on earth. Some of the tallest mountains in the world are located in the Indian Himalayas. On the north-western end of India is the Thar desert. In the interior you can find jungles. Most of southern India is rolling hills with rivers. Then of course there are miles and miles of coastland.

But not only is the geography varied, so are the people. India is 1/3 the size of the US but has 1.2 billion people. In less than 15 years it's projected to surpass China as the world's most populous country. While 22 languages are recognized as official languages, there are 1,652 languages and dialects in total.

There are 156 million Muslims in India, along with, Sikhs, Christians, and Jains. But by far, the overwhelming majority of Indians are Hindu. Now technically Hinduism believes in an ultimate cosmic spirit or divine energy. But you can pick and choose which form of that cosmic spirit you like best.

There are thousands of gods and goddesses in Hinduism. Every Hindu temple is dedicated to a god or goddess.

Some of the most popular are Ganesha the elephant god, Hanuman the monkey god, Lakshmi the goddess of light, beauty, good fortune and wealth, and Kali, the dark mother.

The landscape of India is literally covered with Hindu temples each dedicated to one of the gods or goddesses. It's quite a sight to see a businessman put down his brief case and prostrate himself before a deity!

Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, tells the story of being in a village in east India. He was amazed at all the temples and the images of every deity imaginable.

Driscoll says, he was talking to the wife of a village pastor and he asked her, "Do you think you'll ever come to my country some day?" She said, "I did once and I will never come again." When Driscoll asked her why not, this is what she said, "I cannot stomach the idolatry."

He said, “I’m standing there surrounded by idols and she’s saying she can’t stand the idolatry.” So he asked her, “Where did you see idols in the US?”

She said, “Your god is your stomach and you have restaurants everywhere. Your god is your sports teams and you build multi-million dollar stadiums to house them. Your god is your television and you arrange all the chairs in your living room so your family can all get together and worship that god.”

Driscoll says this, “Then it dawned on me that idolatry is what we see in someone else’s culture. In our culture we just think it’s normal. You go out to eat. You go to the movies. You go to the Bass Pro Shop. We see it as entertainment, not spirituality and religion. We don’t see it as idolatry, and yet sometimes it is.”

The reformer, *John Calvin* said, “The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much. The human heart is a factory of idols...Everyone of us is, from his mother’s womb, expert in inventing idols.”

We’re in the middle of a series we’re calling *Questions From Jesus To Faith Community Church*. What we’re doing is looking at Jesus’ message to each of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3.

As we’ve seen already, these are churches that existed in 1st century Asia Minor. They’re all located in what we call the country of Turkey today but Jesus’ message goes a lot farther than just to these individual congregations. At the end of each of these 7 messages Jesus says the same words...

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 3:6)

In other words He says, “If you’re listening, I’m speaking to you. If you don’t have your ear buds in and the volume on your iPod cranked up too high I have something to say to you. If your not so caught up in living life that you’re oblivious to My voice, I have a question for you.”

The question we’re going to look at today is a question that we need to be able to respond to. “Are you allowing idolatry to go on in your midst?”

Open Bibles to Revelation chapter 2 page 1204

They make all kinds of diagnostic tools to use to evaluate the health of a church. Some are good. Some are not so good. But there's one evaluation that's absolutely authoritative and error-free.

I. Jesus Christ Knows The Spiritual Health of A Congregation Better Than We Do

Read verses 18-19

The book of Revelation is actually called the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The word "revelation" is *apokalupsis* in the original. It literally means "an unveiling" or "a revealing."

Now since it's a revelation "of Jesus Christ" that can mean something that Jesus is revealing or, that Jesus Himself is revealed. I kind of think it's not an either/or here, it's both.

In one sense the risen Christ is revealing things to us about the past, the present, and the future.

He commanded John, *Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.* (Revelation 1:19)

As you go through the book of Revelation you see a timeline of future events that will take place.

So Jesus Christ reveals future events. But I see the book as also a revealing of the nature and character of the Son of God. It truly is an unveiling of Jesus.

When Jesus of Nazareth walked the dusty roads of Palestine in the first century, he looked like everyone else. He didn't have the "stained glass" look with a halo and beams of light emanating out from His head.

In the incarnation the Second Person of the trinity left that visible glory behind and *made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.* (Philippians 2:7)

That was one of the reasons Jesus' fellow Jews struggled with accepting Him as the Son of God. He looked just like everybody else.

Seven hundred years before He came, the Bible prophesied this about Jesus,

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2, 3)

When Jesus was in His hometown the people said, *Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?*” *And they were offended at Him.* (Mark 6:3)

“Isn’t this the guy from down the street? We know his family. Who does he think he is, preaching at everybody?”

In fact, the Bible says, *For even His brothers did not believe in Him.* (John 7:5)

The book of Revelation presents a striking contrast. Nobody says, “Who’s this guy?” This is the risen Christ. This is the glorified and exalted Christ.

Now look again in verse 18. This is *the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass.*

What’s that revealing or showing to us about Jesus? Think about those two images. John MacArthur writes, “There is nothing more penetrating than fire. Everything yields to it. It consumes all opposition and sweeps down all obstructions.”

“His eyes of fire penetrate the human heart to reveal hidden sin. The eyes of the Son of God are able to see through everything; piercing all masks, shredding all coverings, and searching the remotest recesses to see the hidden things of the soul. There is no escape.”

Couple that with feet of brass. Brass is used often in the Bible to signify judgment. It’s like Jesus is ready to crush sin under His feet.

This is a pretty awesome unveiling going on here. It’s not the way we usually think of Jesus.

He was coming right out of the box with this, “I know what’s going on and I’m ready to deal with it” image and attitude.

You know, when the Bible tells us to fear the Lord this is why. This is what it's talking about. It's more than reverence and respect. It's a healthy fear of His knowledge and His judgment.

Now in verse 19 He says, *I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first.*

I know there's some good things here. I know you're a loving congregation. I know that you faithfully serve others. I know that live by faith and are faithful. I know that your patience and works keep on increasing.

That sounds good to me. If God were checking off attributes of Faith Community Church I would hope He'd say those things about us. I believe He would.

In a lot of ways I believe we'd be considered a spiritually healthy congregation.

All this sounds good so far doesn't it? This church at Thyatira Sounds like the ideal church. What could Jesus have been angry with? What could have prompted the use of the images of fiery eyes and feet of bronze?

Well remember...

I. Jesus Christ Knows The Spiritual Health of A Congregation Better Than We Do
II. Sometimes What's Obvious To God Isn't So Obvious To Us

Some of these seven churches were in cities that were centers of emperor worship. Some of them had pagan temples that were wonders in the ancient world.

Thyatira wasn't. They practiced emperor worship as a duty. They had a few smaller pagan temples. But they're real claim to fame was in commerce and trading.

Thyatira was built at the mouth of a strategic river valley. In those days main roads usually followed river valleys.

William Barclay writes, "The roads that passed through its valley brought the trade of half the world to Thyatira's doors."

In Acts 16 we read about Paul and Luke, two early missionaries, coming to Phiippi in Macedonia. Verse 14 says, *Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a*

seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.

Purple dye was very expensive. That's why a purple was a royal color. Lydia was a businesswoman from Thyatira. The fact was, trading and business was Thyatira's claim to fame.

The city still exists today as the Turkish city of Akhisar. It lies in the far west of Turkey, south of Istanbul and almost due east of Athens. It's really an interesting place. It's kind of like Rome in that the ancient ruins are right there in the city itself.

From the inscriptions that archeologists have found in the neighborhoods it seems that Thyatira had more trade guilds than any other town of its size in Asia.

This presented the Christians with a very real dilemma. No merchant or trader could do business unless he was a member of his trade guild. If a trader refused to join the guild he would be shunned and wouldn't get any trade.

Here's where things really got sticky. Those trade guilds were intimately bound up with the worship of heathen gods. They didn't just conduct business. Each guild was like a pagan fraternity with feasts and parties. These were feasts where libations and offerings were made to the gods.

The meat that was served was first sacrificed to idols of Apollo or Artemis, or Tyrimnus, who was a local god. And the partying usually degenerated into sexual immorality as part of the heathen worship. That was pretty standard fare for first century worship of gods and goddesses.

Talk about a tough spot for a Christian to be in. Your choice was possible success or certain poverty.

Read verses 20-23

Jesus, who shows up with eyes of fire and feet of brass says, "Thyatira, we have a problem. And here it is. It's this woman Jezebel. You're allowing her to teach in your congregation and what she's teaching is totally destructive."

It looks like this congregation might have started when Lydia got back to Thyatira from Macedonia.

Acts 16 says Lydia worshipped God. She was either Jewish or a proselyte to Judaism because she got together to pray with a few other people on a riverbank on the Sabbath.

Paul always went to the local synagogue first.

Jewish teaching said that any place where there were 10 adult male Jews a synagogue could be organized. Since Lydia met with a few others outside there must have been a very tiny Jewish population in Philippi.

Luke says that he and Paul spoke with that tiny prayer group and it was there that *the Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul*.

On that Sabbath morning Lydia went from being a worshipper who knew about God, to a child of God. Wherever Paul went he would open up the Old Testament scriptures and teach about Jesus.

One of those passages was probably Isaiah 53 where it says, *But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.* (Isaiah 53:5 & 6)

Lydia realized that all of her goodness, all of her sincerity, all of her worship couldn't pay for sin. That's why Jesus died on the cross. He took our iniquity. He took our sin.

So Lydia placed her faith in Jesus Christ as savior. I don't know where your faith is this morning, but if it's not in Jesus Christ alone I'd challenge you to check out the claims of Jesus Christ.

There's a lot of people who want to make Jesus out to be just a good man, or a prophet, or a great religious teacher. But Jesus made claims that no good man or religious teacher would ever make.

He said things like, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.* (John 11:25, 26)

He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:36)

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.
(John 14:6)

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, He's the only sacrifice for sin, and that He's the way to forgiveness and eternal life.

Lydia believed that truth and you could just see her going back to her friends and family in Thyatira to share that good news with them.

It's easy to see how a woman leader could have risen up to a dominant position in the church if it was another woman who had brought the message of Jesus in the first place.

This woman is identified by Jesus as "Jezebel."

The passage is open to interpretation, but personally I don't think that was her actual name. I think Jesus uses Jezebel because what she was doing was patterned after the original Jezebel in the book of I Kings.

Hold place turn to I Kings 16 page 349

Solomon was the son of the great King David of Israel. His rule started out on target but he ended up marrying multiple wives and many of them were from pagan nations.

Solomon turned away from God and in 931 BC the kingdom was divided in two. In I Kings you have the history of what's called Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

Ahab became king over Israel but he chose to marry for political reasons instead of honoring God.

Read verse 29 – 33

You can tell where both this king and his daughter were spiritually by their names. Both Ethbaal and Jezebel have forms of the word Baal in them. Baal was the chief false god of the day.

One of the reasons God was adamant about His people not intermarrying with pagans was because in almost every case the pagan brings the believer down, not the other way around.

It happened to Solomon. The Bible says, *For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David.* (I Kings 11:4)

And it happened to Ahab. Jezebel eventually impacted all Israel.

Back to Revelation 2

If you've been with us through this series you'll know that this theme of sexual immorality keeps popping up in all these churches. It's not that God is hung up on sex. He's the one who created it in the first place!

But all the way back through scripture false worship, idolatry, and perverted sexuality have always gone hand in hand.

If we don't worship God in truth we'll always find something else to worship. We were created for worship. We can't help it. It's in our DNA.

And all down through history there's a pattern. People who don't worship God end up worshipping self.

This Jezebel was saying, "Lighten up. There's no problem with a little idolatry. Idols are nothing but wood and stone. Lighten up. There's no problem with being sexually loose. After all, didn't God create us as sexual beings?"

Sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols were both things that the rest of society approved of and said was normal. The Christians who said "No" were the weird ones, the out of touch ones.

Os Guinness has written, "Idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible and one of the most powerful spiritual and intellectual concepts in the believer's arsenal. Yet for Christians today it is one of the least meaningful notions and is surrounded with ironies. Perhaps this is why many evangelicals are ignorant of the idols in their lives..."

Richard Keyes defines idolatry this way, "An idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as God. All sorts of things are potential idols, depending only on our attitudes and actions toward them...Idolatry may not involve explicit denials of God's existence or character. It may well come in the form of an over-attachment to something that is, in itself, perfectly good...An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero - anything

that can substitute for God.”

Ken Sande writes, “An idol is not simply a statue of wood, stone, or metal; it is anything we love and pursue in place of God, and can also be referred to as a ‘false god’ or a ‘functional god.’ In biblical terms, an idol is something other than God that we set our hearts on, that motivates us, that masters or rules us, or that we serve.”

If idolatry were just bowing down to images of Hanuman the monkey god most of us would spot it a mile off. But when idolatry is putting something that our society doesn’t count as wrong before God it’s harder to spot.

And as our culture becomes more and more confused about right and wrong things will only get tougher.

We are meant to be ruled by godly passions and desires. Even natural desires for good things, like sexuality, are meant to exist subordinate to our desire to please the Giver of gifts.

Many times the problem isn’t that we’re idolizing something evil, it’s that we’ve let someone or some thing come before God.

There were believers in the church at Thyatira who were deceived. This is why we’re in desperate need of scripture to direct us and make course corrections in our lives. Sometimes it’s just not obvious to us. They listened to a so-called prophet. God tells us that people are fallible. Only God’s Word is absolutely trustworthy.

What does God want from us? He says it right here. He wants repentance. A change of heart and a change of mind based upon His truth.

I. Jesus Christ Knows The Spiritual Health of A Congregation Better Than We Do

II. Sometimes What’s Obvious To God Isn’t So Obvious To Us

III. There Are Rewards When We Hold Onto The Truth

Read verse 24-29

The verses before this are pretty harsh. Cast into a sickbed. Cast into great tribulation. Kill with death. God is serious about us not letting anything take priority over Him. Good or bad.

But He's just as serious about elevating His people who are faithful to Him.

There were some in the church of Thyatira who didn't buy into the false idea that truth was negotiable and that somebody who appealed to human logic had more authority than God Himself.

Jesus said, "You're going to rule with me. What's true of Me will be true of you. I'm going to rule the nations in my kingdom and so are you."

There are rewards if we hold onto the truth. There are rewards if we keep ourselves from idols.

The Bible says, *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.* (1 John 5:21)

The most basic question that God challenges us with is this;

has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ captured your heart's trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?

The motivation question is the lordship question. Who or what "rules" your behavior, the Lord or a third-rate, inferior substitute?