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Revelation #7

Jesus says: "I Know Your Kidneys!"
Revelation 2:18-29

Let's begin our time in God's Word today with a test. Don't worry, no one will grade you other than yourself and God. And there is only one question on this exam. Here it is: ***Where are you today, in terms of Christian growth and zeal and love for Jesus, in comparison with where you were when you first became a Christian?***

Let me put this one question in slightly different terms. Think back to the early days of your Christian life, perhaps the first year or so after your conversion. Do you remember the zeal for God and fascination with all things biblical you felt in the wake of saving grace? Think back on your evangelistic zeal and the courage you displayed in sharing your faith with unsaved family members and friends. Think back on the time and energy expended in service and prayer and ministry in the local church. Bring to mind how devoted you were to reading and studying Scripture. Is it all fresh in your mind? Got the picture?

Now, compare it with where you are today. Has your affection for God's people grown cold? Are you filled with doubts and fears rather than faith and confidence? Have you found excuses not to give generously to the local church or lead a small group? Do you find yourself rationalizing your absence from corporate worship or nurturing bitterness toward another believer who harmed you? Do you spend as much time today in reading and memorizing and meditating on Scripture as you did in your early days as a believer?

I'm taking the test myself, and I have to admit that it's painful and convicting to compare where I was with where I am, where I used to be with where I ought to be in my Christian growth.

Some who profess faith in Christ aren't in the least unnerved by this challenge. They're content with the spiritual status quo. In fact, the only thing that irritates them is people like me challenging them to press on to greater conformity to Christ and more fervent love for his people. "Christianity is all about getting saved and escaping the horror of hell," so they say. "I'm happy where I am in life. Don't pressure me with a call to greater service. I've done my fair share of religious duties. My time card's been punched and I'd really like to be left alone to work on my golf game."

If that's an exaggeration of what professing Christians actually say, it's spot on target with how they actually live. They walked the aisle. They signed the card. They prayed the prayer. They wrote the check. What more do you expect? Well, a lot more, actually.

The Christians who lived in ancient Thyatira would never have understood that mentality. In fact, it's the one thing for which Jesus praised them. ***Having been born again, they refused to coast.*** Their early diligence in ministry and mercy toward others had only increased with time. Hardship hadn't dimmed their faith. Familiarity with Christ had certainly not bred contempt. Right at the start of this letter Jesus said to them: "***your latter works exceed the first***" (Rev. 2:19).

Thyatira

Thyatira was the least known, least remarkable, and least important of the seven cities to receive a letter from the Lord (perhaps its only claim to fame was that Lydia had lived there; see Acts 16:11-15). Yet the letter addressed to it is the longest and most difficult to interpret. The obscurity of the letter and the enigmatic character of certain words and phrases are largely due to the fact that background information on the history of Thyatira, specifically the cultural conditions and circumstances in the first century, is almost wholly lacking. Its spiritual condition, on the other hand, is similar to that of Pergamum. ***Although they are commended for increase in growth and service, there is toleration of falsehood and moral compromise in their midst.***

As noted, Thyatira was a comparatively unimportant city. It had no significant military, political, or administrative responsibilities, and if it is to be noted for anything it is its commercial enterprises. It was a center for manufacturing and marketing and its most distinguishing characteristic was the large number of trade guilds (think of the modern "labor union") that flourished there, the existence of which posed a special problem for Christians. One thing is clear: by the close of the first century the church in Thyatira was both prosperous and active.

The description of Jesus as one with "eyes like a flame of fire" and "feet" like "burnished bronze" is probably an allusion to the ***fiery furnace*** of Daniel 3 into which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown. The added reference to Jesus as "the Son of God" (only here in Revelation, but 46x in the NT) confirms this, for the three Jewish men were delivered by "one like a son of the gods" (Daniel 3:25).

The Thyatirans ought to be encouraged by this word of commendation. Among the "deeds" or "works" that Jesus knows are their "love and faith and service and patient endurance." But surely the best thing said of them is that their "latter works exceed the first." In other words, ***the church in Thyatira was a growing church, not so much numerically but in Christ-like qualities.*** They had learned that the Christian life is one of growth, progress, development, and spiritual increase. Merely maintaining the moral status quo, whether individually or corporately, is inadequate.

Thus whereas Ephesus was backsliding, Thyatira was moving forward. I think we're justified, then, in adding this as another quality of the church that Jesus approves: to the ***doctrinal orthodoxy*** of Ephesus, the ***suffering*** for righteousness' sake of Smyrna, the ***love*** present in Pergamum, we now add the ***growth and development*** of Thyatira.

That's a wonderful legacy, to be known as a church that has faithfully built on the original foundation of love, laboring in God's grace to fan that first flame into a full-blown forest fire of affection and devotion to one another. Not only that, but their faith had increased. Their knowledge of God and his ways and the confidence it breeds had deepened and expanded. But doctrine hadn't gone merely into their heads, but energized their hands as they grew in service and sacrifice for one another. And when times got tough, and the temptation to quit grew more alluring, they persevered.

Surprisingly, though, there was something missing. Some in Thyatira (clearly not all, as v. 24 makes clear) had grown tolerant of the "woman Jezebel" (v. 20) and her wicked ways. The fruit of this compromise had grown rotten and threatened the very life of the body as a whole. And Jesus simply won't stand for it.

But there is this to learn from the church in Thyatira: the Christian life is an ever-upward trek toward greater heights of holiness and love and theological understanding. ***Being born-again is only a beginning, not an end, an inauguration, not a consummation. Appealing to one's initial zeal as an excuse for shifting into spiritual cruise control won't set well with our Lord.***

So, how'd you do on the test? Are there signs of growth in your life? Has your love grown, or simply grown old (and cold)? Do your works of late exceed those first done? Here's my prayer for myself and for Bridgeway:

"Lord, shatter our complacency! Disrupt our indifference! Move us off dead center! Overcome our spiritual inertia and lovingly lead us into new heights of knowledge of you and love for your people and commitment to your kingdom and zeal for the presence and power of your Spirit! May we, by your grace, be people of whom it is said, 'your latter works exceed the first.' Amen."

Words of Complaint

How tragic, after reading of the splendid qualities in Thyatira, to discover that ***moral compromise*** was present in the church. "I have this against you," said Jesus, "that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (Rev. 2:20). Of course, we already spent an entire Sunday looking at this woman Jezebel and the nature of her sin. So I won't spend much time repeating myself today.

Our Lord clearly states that the casting of Jezebel on a sickbed and the infliction of her children with great tribulation, to the point of physical death itself, will be an unmistakable sign to all that ***nothing escapes his gaze or slips in beneath the radar***, so to speak. But how does Christ's judgment against the unrepentant reveal to all Christians everywhere that he has exhaustive and altogether accurate knowledge of the hearts and minds of everyone?

Look again at Revelation 2:23. Following his declaration of impending discipline, he says, “and all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.”

Before we consider this issue I want to make clear how loudly this passage shouts: “**Jesus Christ is God!**” We see it in v. 23 in two ways. **First**, he is *omniscient*, a recurring theme throughout these letters to the churches. The statement here is an obvious allusion to v. 18 where he is described as the one who “has eyes like a flame of fire.” His gaze penetrates all human pretense. His searing vision yields to no barrier. Try as we may to obscure his sight or distract his focus, our Lord sees through and beyond every human façade, every evasive tactic, every clever cover-up. Unlike the comic book hero Superman whose vision could not penetrate lead, the sight and knowledge of Jesus suffer no such hindrance.

But there is a **second** way in which our Lord’s deity is seen. Revelation 2:23 is an unmistakable allusion to Jeremiah 17:10, where we read, “I the Lord search the heart and test the mind [lit., “kidneys” in Hebrew], to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”

The significance of this latter text is that it is *Yahweh* who is speaking of himself. Yet here in Revelation it is a description of Jesus! Jesus *is* Yahweh incarnate! He is not only omniscient Deity, he is also the Judge of all mankind. He sees and knows all and will call all to account for their deeds. Does it have any significant impact on you to think about the fact that Jesus is constantly thinking about precisely what you’re thinking about at every single millisecond of your life? It should.

Let’s return now to the issue at hand. Jesus declares that his decisive action against unrepentant sinners in Thyatira is a warning to all. It should forever put to rest any lingering doubts about whether he knows what is going on in his churches and whether he is of the inclination to take whatever steps are necessary to rectify matters when they get out of hand.

By observing what befalls those in Thyatira, Christians in other congregations will immediately know that Jesus knows and that he will hold all accountable for their deeds. There’s no miscarriage of justice here. No legal sleight of hand. No such thing as inadmissible evidence or testimony being stricken from the record. The judgment of Jesus is based on comprehensive knowledge of every idea in the mind and every impulse of the heart of all mankind.

The word translated “mind” (ESV) is literally the word for “kidneys” (*nephros*). It was often used to describe the inmost, secretive, solemn movements of the soul. Those *deep inner impulses* we so naively think are hidden from everyone but ourselves are seen with utmost clarity by the Lord Jesus. Every intent of the heart, every meditation of the mind, every fantasy, fear, emotion, doubt, deliberation, and decision are the focus of his penetrating gaze.

That is why we can rest assured that those who suffer, as did those in Thyatira, are not mistreated. ***The disciplinary hand of God is guided by the comprehensive scope of his understanding.*** No one can protest by saying, “But God, that’s not what I *truly* meant,” or “But God, I *actually* intended to do otherwise,” for God knows every purpose, plan, and premeditation.

Every affection is seen for what it is, no matter how hard we may strive to conceal it within. Every attitude is known for what it entails, notwithstanding our most diligent efforts to convince ourselves and others that we never entertained such thoughts or conceived such fantasies.

No one expressed it more clearly than the apostle Paul, whose language in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 veritably echoes that of Jesus in Revelation 2.

“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” (1 Cor. 4:3-5).

Spiritual Osteoporosis

Much of the Church today is suffering from an advanced case of what I call ***spiritual osteoporosis***. It’s not widespread throughout the “body” of Christ, but is concentrated along the spine. What I have in mind is ***the Church’s loss of its theological backbone!***

We see this in any number of ways. For example, many have begun to fudge on the ethical status of homosexuality. Fearful of being labeled “homophobic,” they’ve adopted a “live and let live” approach to the issue. Others, not wanting to appear elitist or exclusivistic, no longer insist on personal faith in Christ as essential for salvation. Then there are those who’ve gone “soft” on the very concept of doctrine itself, believing that theological orthodoxy is both elusive and divisive and should be minimized for the sake of some ethereal and ill-defined unity.

I’m certainly no fan of angry sectarianism or the sort of dogmatic arrogance that judges and separates over secondary issues. At the same time, there *are* standards of truth to uphold and principles of behavior on which we must insist.

It’s good to know that, notwithstanding the problems in ancient Thyatira, there were some in the church who refused to compromise or cut corners. Jesus describes them and delivers a special word of encouragement in Revelation 2:24-25. “But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come.”

There are four things here worthy of our attention. **First**, they are described as those “who do not hold this teaching,” i.e., the teaching of Jezebel. Not only do they not embrace the doctrines she espouses but neither do they practice her wicked ways. In other words, these are folks who refused to take the easy path by looking the other way. They were neither gullible nor easily persuaded by the novel and deceptive concepts circulating in Thyatira. These were people who weren’t afraid of calling heresy, heresy! The men and women Jesus addresses here knew that *sometimes discrimination can be a virtue*. They believed in the existence of absolute truth and unyielding ethical principles and were prepared to identify deviations from it. These were people who refused to embrace theological relativism, as if *what* one believes is less important than the *sincerity* and *fervency* with which one believes it.

Second, they are described as those “who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan.” This intriguing phrase calls for explanation. Some believe it to be a sarcastic reversal of the claims of Jezebel and “her children”. They claim to know “deep [spiritual] things” when in fact what they know comes from and concerns the devil himself. In other words, the phrase “of Satan” is a sarcastic addition by Jesus designed to tell the faithful in Thyatira the true nature of their ideas and experience. Those of Jezebel may actually have used the words “of God” which Jesus deliberately alters to make the point.

Others suggest that the “deep things of Satan” is a reference to their insistence that in order to appreciate fully the depths of grace and of God (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10) one must first plumb the depths of evil and the enemy. They would claim that, because of their spiritual maturity and superiority, they need fear nothing from the devil.

In any case, it’s stunning to realize that people who profess to know Christ and attain to positions of authority and influence in the church can be proponents of Satanic doctrine and practitioners of ethical compromise. What we desperately need today, as they did then, is an increase of (back)bone density, a strengthening of resolve to hold fast the line of orthodoxy and a courageous commitment to that holiness of life that will assuredly evoke disdainful accusations of being narrow-minded and puritanical.

Third, Jesus obviously knew that what he expected of them wasn’t easy. It called for sacrifice and diligent attentiveness to belief and behavior, the sort that would expose them to ridicule and perhaps loss of income and influence. Thus he says, “I do not lay on you any other burden.” It is enough, says Jesus, that you stand firm. It is enough that you not lose heart. It is enough that you resist every temptation to cater to popular opinion or adjust your convictions to whatever theological “trend” is emerging in your city.

Fourth, and finally, he encourages them to “*hold fast*” what they have until he comes. In a word, *persevere* in what you have already received. Be immovable! Don’t yield an inch! Cut not a corner!

All too often, especially in charismatic circles, the penchant for novelty or the hankering after some “fresh” word from God dictates the ministry or mission of a church. The frequency with which a pastor or teacher offers heretofore unknown “insights” into Scripture is made the measure of his “anointing” and favor with God. I’m not saying there is nothing more to learn from the Bible than what we now know. Far from it! But we must be careful lest the allure of “newness” or novelty detract us from focusing on the “old, old story of Jesus and his love” (I fear that few will recall that hymn!).

As for my concern with *spiritual osteoporosis* in the church today, I have no desire to see it replaced by a *hardening of the theological arteries*! Speaking the truth in love is never easy. But we must never play off one against the other. Jesus believed both were possible. So must we.

Another Promise to the One who Conquers

Those who “overcome” or “conquer” are the very people who are persecuted, thrown in prison, and even subjected to martyrdom (see Rev. 2:3,9-11,13). The promise to them is that if they keep Christ’s “works until the end” they will be given authority to rule over nations even as Christ has been given authority from his Father to rule (see Psalm 2).

Who or *what* are these “nations” and *when* is it that Christians will exercise their rule over them? Some (perhaps most) believe this is a promise to be fulfilled on the millennial earth, that 1,000 year period of human history that Premillennialists believe will follow the second coming of Christ and precede the inauguration of the eternal state.

Bear with me as I make an alternative suggestion. Could it be that ***the reward noted here is the authority granted to the saints when they enter into co-regency with Christ in heaven, now?*** A similar promise is made to the faithful in Laodicea: “The one who conquers, *I will grant him to sit with me on my throne* [namely, the place of rule, government, and authority], as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:21).

My point is that this co-regency with Christ is fulfilled now, in heaven, that is to say, in the so-called “intermediate state” where the dead in Christ live in conscious, intimate fellowship with the Savior. To put it simply and to the point: The “conquerors” / “overcomers” are not merely those over whom Christ will rule but those with whom Christ now rules.

We often fail to grasp the glory of what awaits those who “die in the Lord” and enter his presence. Although it is an *intermediate* state, that is to say, it is *in between* our present earthly existence and our final and glorified experience when we receive the resurrection body, it is nevertheless a wonderful and joyful and meaningful time. It is during this time, simultaneous with the present church age, that those who have died in Christ experience the fulfillment of this promise: they are even ***now*** ruling and reigning over the nations of the earth together with and alongside of their sovereign Lord.

For those of you not familiar with the debate over biblical eschatology, this is the perspective known as *Amillennialism*. Contrary to the label which suggests we don't believe in the existence or reality of a millennium (observe how the alpha privative "a" seemingly negates the word "millennial"), we most assuredly do! ***The "millennium" is concurrent/simultaneous with the church age in which we live.***

Again, contrary to the charge of "spiritualizing" the millennial kingdom, the saints ***truly*** and ***literally*** are enthroned with Christ, they are ***truly*** and ***literally*** reigning with Christ. This is not metaphor, but a concrete and living reality. The millennium, therefore, isn't the experience of Christians in the Church on earth but that of the saints in heaven. They have been enthroned. They now rule. They share in the exercise of Christ's dominion and sovereignty over the affairs and events and nations of the earth.

The apostle Paul had this in view in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26. There he describes Christ's current sovereign rule over the affairs of both heaven and earth, one in which Jesus says (in Rev. 2:25-29) his people who "conquer" will share. Look at it closely:

"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:24-26).

Practically speaking, this means that the Apostle John and Augustine, as well as Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, together with my earthly father and Mary Magdalene, Susannah Wesley and the untold millions of others who are *absent from the body but present with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:1-10) are now exercising a divinely delegated authority in the providential oversight of the nations of the earth!

This enthronement and rule of the saints in heaven, with Christ, will continue far beyond the "millennial" phase in which it currently exists. There is an *eternal* expression of this experience that will unfold not only in the New Heavens but also on the New Earth (cf. Rev. 5:10) that will be created at the coming of Christ (Revelation 21-22). The nature of that authority and rule will undoubtedly change, given the fact that all unbelievers will have by then been banished to their eternal punishment in hell, but our co-regency with Christ will never cease.

As I read further in this passage it appears that the promise of co-regency with Christ is reinforced yet again. In v. 28 Jesus declares that the overcomer will receive ***"the morning star"***. It's possible that this is a reference to Jesus himself (see Rev. 22:16). But there is another option that relates this statement to what has preceded in the immediate context. The "morning star" is generally regarded as referring to ***Venus*** (although technically a planet), which itself was ***an ancient symbol for sovereignty***. In Roman times, notes Beasley-Murray,

"it was more specifically the symbol of victory and sovereignty, for which reason Roman generals owned their loyalty to Venus by erecting temples in her honour . . . and Caesar's

legions carried her sign on their standards. . . . If then the morning star was the sign of conquest and rule over the nations, this element in the promise to the conqueror strengthens the statement that has gone before. It embodies in symbol the prophecy already cited from the psalmist. The conqueror is therefore doubly assured of his participation with Christ in the glory of his kingdom” (94-95).

I certainly have no illusions about resolving the often acrimonious debate over biblical eschatology. In fact, I suspect my comments will provoke no little response (perhaps most of it negative). But as I read this passage, in conjunction with the whole of Scripture, I see a glorious affirmation of the destiny of the faithful who die in Christ.

To all outward appearances and the judgment of the unbelieving eye, it may seem that we have suffered loss. Yet, for the believer, *to die is to live!* What strikes the world as defeat and humiliation is for the Christian an entrance into life and exaltation! Let us never forget that the saints have “conquered” Satan “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, *for they loved not their lives even unto death*” (Rev. 12:11; see also Rev. 15:2; 17:14.).

Conclusion

One final word of exhortation is needed. I hear news, almost on a daily basis, or read an article on the Internet describing a famous Christian or yet another local church that has turned its back on some biblical truth or ethical principle. They often will insist that we Christians are on the wrong side of history and out of touch with the ever-changing beliefs in our culture. “Get on board and adapt,” so they say, or be left behind in the wake of a culture that is increasingly hostile to the things of Christ. “Your ancient beliefs, based on the Bible, will only serve to alienate you from the society in which you live.”

To this, I would only echo to Bridgeway the words of Jesus to the church in Thyatira:

“Only hold fast what you have until I come” (Rev. 2:25).

Hold fast Bridgeway! Hold fast!