

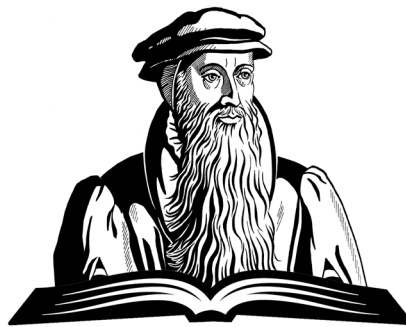
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia

*by Rev. William Macleod*

Lecture #5

## The Letter to the Church in Thyatira



The John Knox Institute  
of Higher Education

## **John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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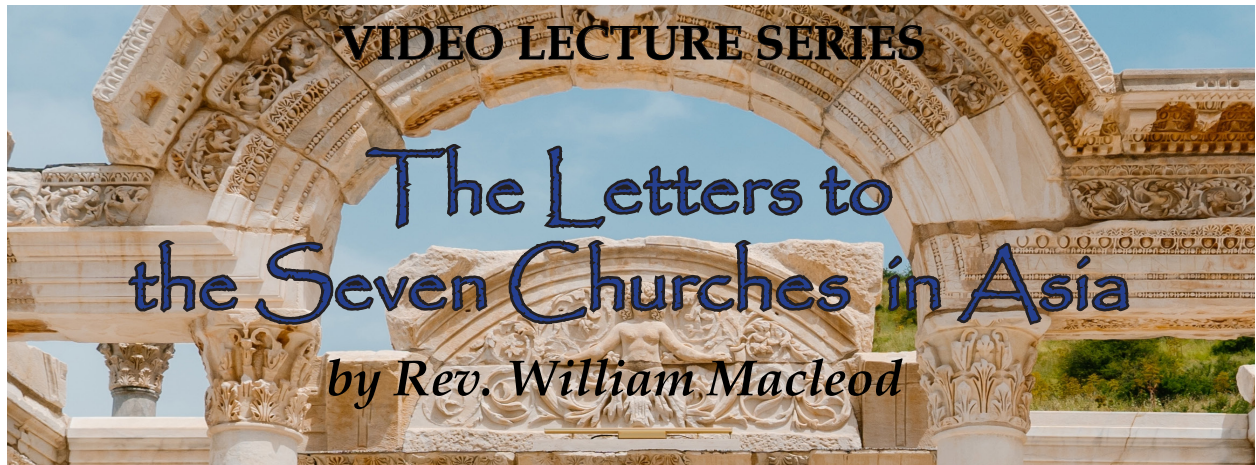
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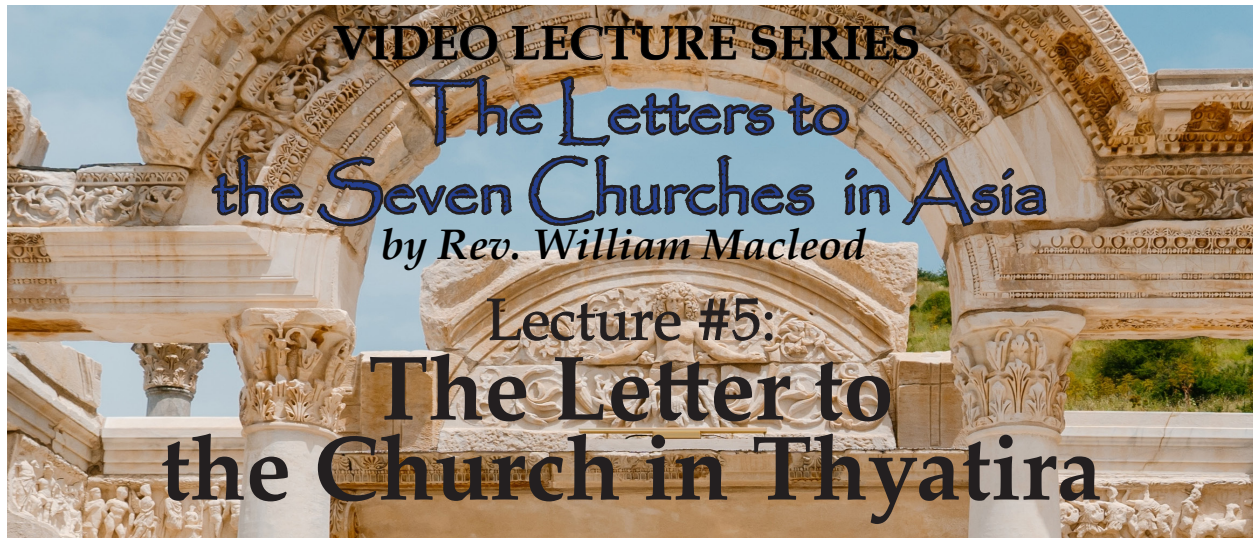
Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The Free Church Witness*. He was also Professor of Systematic Theology and Principal of the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary, in Inverness, Scotland. He is married and has three adult children and six grandchildren.

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## Introduction

Today, our lecture is on *The Letter to the Church in Thyatira*. That's recorded for us in the Book of Revelation chapter 2, and verses 18 to 29. Thyatira was situated about forty miles southeast of Pergamos. And there's a circle of these churches in Asia Minor, from Ephesus in the south, reaching up to Pergamos in the north, and then back down. So it's part of modern Asiatic Turkey, and a church was planted there very early on.

Thyatira, as a town, was much smaller than Pergamos. We know of one famous Christian from Thyatira. We're told, in Acts chapter 16 of Lydia, who was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira. Remember how Paul had received the Macedonian call, "Come over... and help us" (verse 9); he made his way to Philippi in Europe, and then, on the Sabbath Day, he went out to a little gathering of Jewish people who were praying by the riverside outside of Philippi. And as he preached to them, we're told that God opened Lydia's heart so that she gave heed to the things spoken by Paul. She was enlightened; she was enabled to believe, and following that, was baptized. So God opened Lydia's heart. And I hope we can each one of us say, too, that God has come into our lives and opened our hearts.

The church in Thyatira seems to have been similar to the one in Pergamos. There were good people in the church, but there were also problems. Good works were done, but there was immorality in the church. A false prophetess, who was called Jezebel, was encouraging immorality and idolatry, and Christ writes to this church, encouraging them to hold fast, to be steadfast, and to overcome.

## 1. The One Who Writes this Letter

He's described for us, he describes himself in verse 18: "An unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass." So he introduces himself here as the Son of God, that is, the divine Creator, the Ruler of the world, the preserver of all things. So, he's the Almighty. He's far above heathen gods. Basically, these gods are nonentities. They have no power; they have no life in them, no existence. But the one who is writing here is the Son of God, the real God, the living God. So the people of Thyatira are to take heed to what he is saying.

And he also asserts that he has "eyes like unto a flame of fire." So that, again, stresses that he's watching. His eyes are not dead eyes; they are alive and flashing. They're looking and seeing, seeing into hearts; seeing into the secrets in people's lives. He sees what is done in darkness. Some people are very careful to hide what they are doing from their fellow man, but you cannot hide anything from Christ. Could you be like that—ashamed if you are found out about doing this or doing that in the darkness, in secret? Well, remember, it's far more important to be aware of Christ watching. He is the great Judge at the end of the day. We must be careful not to sin against him.

"His eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass." His feet, to trample upon his enemies, upon those who are sinning against him, upon hypocrites who pretend to be good and holy, and members of a church, and yet, they're involved secretly in immorality and wickedness. Remember, Christ is watching. He sees. His eye is upon you. He knows all that you do. He knows even the secret thoughts of your heart. So we need to have more of the fear of God, more of a consciousness and an awareness that Christ is watching. And when we sin, our duty is to repent at once, claim the blood of Christ to wash away our sins, and seek his grace never to sin again.

So the one who writes, then, is the Son of God, with eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet like fine brass.

## 2. Words of Praise

Next, we notice *Words of Praise*, given in verse 19: "I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first." God is seeing everything we do. He notes what is good. He misses nothing. He forgets nothing. Whatever we do for the Lord, he's watching, he's noting, he's seeing it. There's only one church amongst the seven who receives no praise at all. That's the church at Laodicea. All the other churches, there's some good things there, and our Lord doesn't miss that; he notes these good things.

He says, "I know thy works." *Works* are very important—not that works earn salvation for us; not that they add in any way to the merit of Christ. We're saved simply by the blood of Christ who shed blood at Calvary. He suffered our hell. He endured as our substitute, punished in our place, and he has earned for us full, free salvation. We are saved by Christ alone. But having been saved, we are then to show our love, to show our appreciation in the works we do. Our works express our gratitude to Christ. And by these works, we manifest our salvation. Justified by faith alone, and yet we manifest our justification in our works.

So, he says, "I know thy works, and charity"—your *love*. Love is so important—vitally important. The fruit of the Spirit, the first fruit that's mentioned is love: "Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22–23). Love



comes first, it's so important. Indeed, Christianity can be expressed by the word "love." What is it to be a Christian?—it's to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37 and 39). That's the Christian life. So love is really important.

"I know your charity, and service." *Service* is a fruit of love, a love that is practical; a love that cares, and helps, and supports, and looks out for the needy, and does what it can to help the needy. "I know your service. You in the church in Thyatira, you serve one another. You care for one another. You bear one another's burdens. You're involved in one another's lives to help each other at the point that you need it." That's wonderful. Christ sees it and he praises it.

"And your faith"—*faith* expresses itself in prayer, believing in the goodness of God, the love of God, the kindness of God. But believing also in the power of God. God can do, he can do anything. He's Almighty. He's powerful. So our faith believes in the power of God to answer prayer, and the mercy and love of God to give to us what is best. And so, the church in Thyatira was distinguished by its faith. These Christians, they were men and women of faith, trusting in the Lord, and praying to the Lord, and receiving answers to their prayers—believing in the goodness and kindness of God, and in the power of God.

And the next thing that's mentioned is *patience*. Patience is so important. In the New Testament, the word "patience" always means "perseverance." And it's the idea of keeping on going against all problems and difficulties, trials, tribulations, persecutions, opposition—patience. Keep on going; endure, persevere unto the end, through fire and water, passing through all these difficulties with longsuffering and steadfastness. There was patience in the church in Thyatira.

And then, *works* again mentioned: "And thy works; and the last to be more than the first." So there's a progression in good works. It's not that they used to do good works, and now it's tailing off, but rather the opposite. When they were first converted, they were doing good works, and now they're doing more good works. It's an increasing diligence and faithfulness. Can that be said of you? Can that be said of me? Are we increasing in our work for the Lord? Are we increasing in our diligence in serving one another and serving Him? So the church here was certainly not a lazy church. "I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first."

## **2. A Serious Problem—that Woman Jezebel**

But then there was a problem, a serious problem in the church in Thyatira. It's mentioned in verse 20: "Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols." Jezebel, the prophetess—"Jezebel" was not her real name, but she's given that name by Christ. Jezebel was the most wicked woman in the Bible. Remember how she was the daughter of Ethbaal, the priest king of Zidon, a country, a city-state to the northwest of Israel. And she married king Ahab (1 Kings 16:31–31). Bit by bit, she introduced Baal worship into Israel. First, she got a temple built for herself so that she could worship Baal in her temple. And then she got priests and prophets appointed. And then she got these priests and prophets to come to the royal table, giving more and more position in the country to Baal worship. And then she began to persecute the prophets of the Lord. You'll remember how Elijah had to flee from her; she threatened to kill him (1 Kings 19:1–3). So, Jezebel, a wicked woman, a promoter of false religion, immorality, and also idolatry. And that's

the name that is given to this woman who was very influential in the church in Thyatira.

The Bible tells us that *women shouldn't be prophets or preachers within the church*. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 12; "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man." This woman, Jezebel, she was usurping authority in the church. She was taking over the position of ruling and teaching in the church. She was claiming that she had a call from God, and that she was inspired by God's Spirit. She was claiming to be a prophet. But God never contradicts himself. God had said plainly, in 1 Corinthians 14:34, "Let your women keep silence in the churches." Women are not meant to be preachers and teachers. Yes, in one sense, men and women are equal. In Jesus Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28). We are heirs together of God. We are equally valued in that sense. But then there's a certain order within the church; order within the family. The husband is the head of the wife, and wives are to be submissive to their husbands; and order also within the church. Those who were elders—in 1 Timothy chapter 3, we're given the qualifications for eldership. The elder was to be a man, and it was only men who were to lead, to be pastors in the church, and women were forbidden from teaching. "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man...For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Timothy 2:12–14). And that's why God has laid this down from the very beginning, that in the church, there should only be male preachers.

But sadly, this woman came in, and she was affecting the church. And we find that in the church today, there are often in many places, women preachers, and women elders, and women pastors. But this is something that receives no justification from the Bible, but rather, the Bible condemns it. It's dangerous for us to move away from biblical teaching. And if a woman claims that God has called her to be a minister, or claims she's prayed about it, we still should not yield to that. God's Word is to be our final rule, not people's own subjective judgment. Someone else might claim that they prayed about their adulterous relationship, and they feel quite happy about it; or their homosexual relationship. Homosexuality is acceptable in our society today, but the fact that they prayed about it, and they say that they feel happy about it, and God is leading them in that way, that's no guide. Our guide is the Word of God. That is the rule, the final rule, the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God. So elders and ministers should be men.

But this woman was not only a teacher, but she was an heretical teacher: "to seduce my servants to commit fornication." She was encouraging *immorality in the church*. No doubt, she herself was engaging in immorality, and she was encouraging others to do the same. Once you deny one point of God's law, it's easy to deny the rest. And immorality is so attractive to the flesh. There is within each one of us the lust of the flesh. We are easily tempted, and so, we must watch and pray, and fight against sin and temptation. God demands purity—purity in our marriages. Man is to marry one wife, and to be faithful to that wife, and the wife is to be faithful to her husband all days of her life. Whom God has joined together let not man put asunder (Mark 10:9). We are to be pure in our lives. We are not to tolerate sin. God hates sin. He hates immorality. And furthermore, there's no promise for forgiveness for presumptuous sin. The psalmist, in Psalm 19, pleads with God to keep him from presumptuous sin (verse 13), from going on in sin, determined to sin. If we know something is wrong, we must not do it. And if we do, we must repent at once and change our way of behavior.

So, she seduces "my servants to commit fornication, and to *eat things sacrificed unto idols*." To go to the feasts and the idol parties that were around at that time. In one sense, yes, as Paul

says, “an idol is nothing” (1 Corinthians 8:4), but then, if you go to these feasts, and you indulge in these feasts, and you’re eating something that has been offered to an idol, you’re definitely sinning. These feasts led to immorality, and it was a terrible witness for Christians to do there, and they were leading other astray. It’s a sin to eat something as offered to an idol. We must reject all idolatry and dissociate ourselves from it. “Come [ye] out from among them, and be ye separate...and touch not the unclean thing” (2 Corinthians 6:17). God is calling us away from all dealings with idols. Have nothing to do with idols. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath:...thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 5:7–9). And God is angry when we worship idols, nonentities. And so, this church had a few things against them, but they were serious. There was immorality in the church, and there was eating things sacrificed to idols.

Verse 21: “And I gave her space to repent.” She was given time, given a warning to repent. She was made aware that something was wrong, and yet, she, Jezebel, was determined to continue. Some ministers, who are involved in immorality, and Christians too—something terrible happens, some accident, some illness—it’s a warning. Some tragedy comes into their lives. God is shaking them up so that they will face up to their sin, and repent of it, and turn from it. Has God done that in your life? Something terrible happened which is warning you against your immorality. Don’t persist in immorality. God is long-suffering, but not forever. The day of his judgment does come. “I gave her space to repent of her fornication,” but “she repented not.”

### 3. The Judgment Upon Her

And so, we see, next, *The Judgment Upon Her*, verse 22: “Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deed. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.”

“I will cast her into a bed”—a bed of tribulation; a bed of sickness and trouble. Immorality leads to suffering and to sin. A worldly lifestyle leads to all kinds of trouble—it leads to sexually-transmitted diseases; it leads to AIDS;<sup>1</sup> it leads often to drunkenness, alcoholism, drug addiction. All these things occur with immorality, and with feasts and parties. The devil promises pleasure. And yes, there is some pleasure for a few moments, but it’s so short, and then comes the guilt, and the misery, and the pain, and the illness, and the suffering. “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23). Sin—God sees it, and God punishes it. Sin is followed by shame, by disaster, by sickness, and sometimes even by suicide.

“Except they repent”—God is merciful. At any point, we can repent; we should repent, and if we genuinely repent, God is merciful. If we turn from sin to Christ, he’s ready to receive us. But if you go on wallowing in sin with Jezebel, what hope is there? So turn from sin. Turn from it immediately, and you will find mercy. “I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.” How sad that is.

And then, verse 23: “And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts.” Ultimately, judgment comes. God kills her children. Death comes along, and death is followed by hell. Sin is punished. And that should be frightening to us. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), whoever we are, the wages of sin

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<sup>1</sup> AIDS is short for *Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome*, an ongoing, chronic condition, also called HIV, or Human Immunodeficiency Virus.



is death. Therefore, repent, because the gift of God is everlasting life. But, if we continue in sin, there's no promise of everlasting life, but rather, a promise of God's judgment.

"And all the churches will know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts; and I will give unto every one of you according to your works." All the churches will know—nothing is hidden from God. He searches the hearts. He sees our thoughts. He knows what goes on in darkness. Don't try and play around with God. He demands holiness. "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). "Be ye holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). He hates immorality, and we should hate it too. If we are born-again Christians, surely, we should hate sin. Come out from among them and be separate (2 Corinthians 6:17). So that's a judgment of God upon Jezebel and her followers.

#### **4. The Godly Must Hold Fast**

And then, verse 24–25, *The Godly Must Hold Fast*: "But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come." Those who don't have this doctrine, who were not antinomians rejecting God's law, and wallowing in sin, who don't know the depths of Satan—it's amazing how Satan tempts people, and says, "Try this out. Experience it for yourself. Experiment with this indulgence, so that you will know what it is; so that you will know the depths of Satan. There's always forgiveness; there's always mercy; there's always grace—you can repent afterwards." And people foolishly think they can wallow in sin, and yet be forgiven. But no, flee from fornication, flee from idolatry, run away from it. Think of Joseph. Remember how Potiphar's wife, his master's wife, tried to get him to commit fornication with her—adultery; how, on one occasion, she caught hold of his clothes and pulled him, as it were, towards her and towards her bed. And he left his coat with her and fled. He ran away. That's the best way to deal with immorality. Flee from it. Don't try to argue with it. Don't try to argue with Satan. He's too cleaver for us. So the great point that's stressed here is purity, repentance—turn away from fornication and idolatry.

And verse 25: "Hold fast till I come." Hold fast what you have. Hold fast onto God's law, to God's Word. Treasure the Scriptures. Delight in the old paths, the old ways of God, the good ways, the holy ways. Seek to be holy men and holy women. Some traditions are bad, but not all of them. Many are very, very good. Follow in the footsteps of the holiest men and women you know. Paul says, "Be ye followers together of me, even as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). You cannot be too holy. Blessed are the pure, the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matthew 5:8). "Hold fast till I come." "I am coming again. I am returning. Be prepared, be ready. Be ready to meet me, because, when I come, I will come to judge."

#### **5. A Promise to the One Who Overcomes**

And then, there's a promise in verses 26–27: "And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father." *A Promise to the One Who Overcomes*. If we are overcome, we will be judged and punished. We must not be overcome, but rather, be overcomers ourselves. We must be victorious over temptation. We must keep the Word of God, love the Lord, and love his laws. And Jesus says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). And so, we are to be doing God's work, what pleases God, and not what pleases the flesh.

The one who overcomes, “I will give power over the nations,” to rule with Christ; to sit with him in his throne. “He shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.” Remember Psalm 2—Christ is appointed King in Zion; he destroys his enemies, he smashes them into pieces like a potter’s vessel. And Christ is saying here, “You, if you overcome, you will share with me, you will sit with me in my throne, and you shall reign with me, and you shall reign with a rod of iron, destroying your enemies.” How wonderful that you and I are being invited to share with Christ in his throne, in the dignity, the glory, the blessedness of his throne. If we are faithful, there is a reward. Christ has received the kingdom from his Father, he reigns over it, and he gives it to us, and we are heirs and joint-heirs with Christ.

And then, verse 28: “And I will give him the morning star.” The morning star speaks of a new dawn, a great day ahead, a blessed future. Those who overcome, those who are faithful, those who are godly, those who turn away from immorality, who flee from fornication, adultery, pornography, and all the rest of it, there’s a great future for you. Those who will take nothing to do with idolatry, but devote their lives to God, he promises them a new day.

A morning star—who is this morning star? Revelation 22, verse 16 tells us, Christ is the morning star. And we will possess him. He will be ours, and we will be his. For evermore we will dwell with him. What a reward! He who has ears to hear, “let him hear.” There’s a challenge here to purity. Keep yourselves unspotted from the world. “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction”—to show love to the poor and needy—“and to keep [yourselves] unspotted from the world”—James 1, and verse 27. And then, you will enjoy the morning star. You will have Christ, and you will share with him in his throne, reigning with him for evermore. Amen.