

Revelation 2:18-29

“Thyatira: The Tolerant Church”

Imago Dei Church | 6/2/19 | 2 Services | Sunday AM

INTRODUCTION

Are you a tolerant person?

Depends. Annoying coworker? Spicy food? Bad drivers? Lack of control? Disrespect? Injustice?

One of the defining features of our culture right now is an esteem for *tolerance* as a virtue. Media, schools, government—all seem to be making a concerted effort to make tolerance the highest good of our day. But as the list I just gave you made clear, **tolerance is only a virtue depending on its referent**. WHAT are you tolerating? And should that thing be tolerated? If not, what kind of action, if any, do I take?

Knowing when to be tolerant and when not to be tolerant is not always easy, but as the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to exercise this discernment under the lordship of Christ.

The church in Thyatira was a tolerant church. They found themselves in a difficult context with difficult choices, and **their general posture was one of non-confrontation and tolerance**.

The church at Thyatira was in a situation similar to the church at Pergamum. It was a smaller city, a military outpost, whose social and commercial life centered around various trade guilds.

Thyatira was a center of trade, so life there centered around trade guild—groups of people who traded together, negotiated, socialized, and even worshipped. Part of being in these guilds was attending feasts to their patron deity in order to gain favor in commerce.

Christians in these trade guilds were **faced with a choice**: (a) to join in the worship of idols or (b) abstain and risk almost certain social and financial penalties. For some, their fear of loss, of ostracism, of financial ruin, drove their actions and earned them this letter of rebuke from the Lord.

Now, in order to understand what all is going on in this church, it's helpful to know who the players are. I count no less than 4 groups within this church, all of whom had fallen short in one way or another.

- 1) **Jezebel** – the leader of syncretism, who probably taught that that it was okay or even good for Christians to participate in idol-worship and even sexually immoral practices

[20] ...Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice **sexual immorality** and **to eat food sacrificed to idols**.

Not her real name. Like Balaam in the previous text, Jesus is referring to an **OT figure who was an "outsider" from God's people**, but nonetheless came into the people of God and led them astray.

Queen Jezebel was married to the wicked King Ahab, leading him and Israel to worship foreign gods, kill God's prophets, and countless other atrocities. She became shorthand for the precise sin that led to Israel's destruction and exile.

So there's this woman who is leading the heresy of syncretism.

- 2) **The syncretists** – followers of Jezebel who agreed with her teaching
- 3) **The deceived** – those who wrestled with how to handle their situation, and sometimes compromised.
- 4) **The tolerant** – those who didn't agree with the compromising syncretists, but nonetheless tolerated them.

As we look at the letter, consider which of these groups you are most likely to fall into.

1. THE AUTHORITATIVE INTRODUCTION

(2:18)

[18] "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.'

Verse 18 gives us three identifying markers of the Lord Jesus, each of which gives us a clue as to his purpose in this letter.

- 1) **"Son of God"** – only here in Rev.; probably an intentional contrast with Apollo, the sun god and the son of Zeus who was revered in Thyatira.

Jesus is the true Son, to be feared and revered more than idols to a made-up deity.

Establishes his authenticity and his authority.

- 2) **"Eyes like a flame of fire"** — omniscience; perfect judgement; purifying gaze; exhaustive ([23] "... I am he who searches mind and heart...")
- 3) **"feet are like burnished bronze"** – Thyatira was known for its metalworkers; speaks to the strength of Jesus' judgments;

In contrast to the church in Thyatira, Jesus will not hesitate to declare right from wrong, and his judgments are perfect and powerful. He is not to be toyed with.

This is one of the main mistakes of the church in Thyatira—they failed to esteem Christ rightly. They feared the judgment of men more than the all-knowing, perfect judgment of the one true God.

(APP) Our sin and our tolerance of sin are always built on the foundation of a low view of Christ.

We sin because our God is too small in our hearts. Yes, Jesus came as a **suffering servant**, but we fail to remember that our God is a **consuming fire** and the same Jesus that endured the cross will be alive and is returning to bring perfect judgment.

2. THE ALL-KNOWING EVALUATION

(2:19-23)

A. Commendation of the Church (19)

[19] “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

“works” (5x) — 5 aspects that are commendable

- 1) **love** —
- 2) **faith** —
- 3) **service** —
- 4) **patient endurance** —
- 5) **latter works exceed their first** — note: this is the opposite of the sin of the Ephesian church,

whose loss of love led to a decline in good works
(2:5)

B. Charges against the Church (20-21)

[20] But I have this against you, **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.

Their **primary sin** was tolerance, not participation.

Seems like *most* of this church wasn't actually participating.

On the outside, their works looked good. But Jesus' 'eyes or fire' see the heart, and in their hearts he saw a people whose view of his lordship was lacking.

Specifically, they tolerated the leader, this woman he calls Jezebel. She went in and out with little distinction between her and those who abstained.

Teaching ... persuading

Note: someone had opposed her (cf. v.21)—but it had no teeth!

[21] I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

(APP)

Church Leadership – know, lead, feed, protect
Church Membership

Church Discipline – restorative, yes. But also protective!)

C. Judgment on the Compromisers (22-23a)

[22] Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, [23] and I will strike her children dead.

Jezebel — “sickbed” seems to be a promise of judgment on her health.

Adulterers — these are the deceived; those who followed her advice into idolatry, sexual immorality, and compromise. NOTE: still have time to repent!

Children — those who fully buy into her false teaching. DEAD.

The judgment is severe, and perhaps our modern sensibilities retract from the harshness of the punishment. But even our gut reaction is a challenge to us to elevate our view of God’s righteousness, God’s holiness, and perhaps most immediately...his Word. (APP)

D. Proclamation of Christ’s Perfect Judgment (23b)

And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

Why? Why is he doing this? To make clear that he is the perfect judge, who (a) sees perfectly and exhaustively and (b) executes judgment righteously.

Echoes of OT (esp. Ezek) — "then they will know that I am the Lord"

3. THE APPROPRIATE EXHORTATION

(2:24-25)

[24] 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. [25] Only hold fast what you have until I come.

Some might say, where is the Lord's compassion? Here it is! It's a **holy compassion** that refuses to take sin lightly but looks on those who are walking with him and tenderly says (a) "**keep going**", and (b) "**I'm coming for you**"

(APP) How hard it is to simply persevere!

1. The temptation to compromise
2. The temptation to not make waves
3. The temptation to find an easy way out
4. The temptation for 'something more' ("deep things")

(APP) It'd be an error, I think, not to become explicit with some of the particular temptations we face in our

context—areas in which we are drawn to compromise, syncretize, or otherwise tolerate. Like Thyatira we live in a context where it is at least possible (in some circles) to lose financial and social status by holding fast to the truth of the gospel and the teachings of Christ in the Scriptures—

1. The exclusivity of Christ as the only way to have eternal and full life...
2. The reality of eternal judgment...
3. That human sexuality is meant to be shared between 1 man and 1 woman for life in the context of marriage...
4. That human beings do not gain value only outside the womb, but because they are made in the image of God and should therefore be protected...
5. That racial prejudice or any personal or systemic injustice that punishes people for the color of their skin or their gender is anti-gospel...
6. That you are not defined by your job, or paycheck, or productivity, but by your creator and your relationship to him...

—Friends, holding fast to these truths may cost you something. It may cost you money, it may cost you friends, it may cost you status, and for some of our

brothers and sisters around the world it may cost them their safety and even their lives.

But in his kindness, the Lord Jesus, looks at us and reminds us, "I am coming back for you. Hold fast."

Leads to the last segment...

4. THE AWE-INSPIRING CONCLUSION

(2:26-29)

[26] The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, [27] and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. [28] And I will give him the morning star. [29] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

He identifies those who hold fast as those who "conquer"—and he gives us a **definition**: those who keep his word until the end.

To these he gives two gifts, and both of them have some mystery:

1. Authority (26) —
2. The morning star (28) —

The authority he gives to his faithful people is like the authority he received from his Father. It's a direct reference to **Psalms 2**, when the Messianic king received from the Lord the authority to bring all nations under his rule.

Psalm 2:8-9

- [8] Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
[9] You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

The morning star appears again at the very end of this book, when Jesus says...

Revelation 22:16

- [16] "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (ESV)

Jesus is saying that those who hold to his truth and walk in his ways will be brought into his work. He is the one who rules the nations, and he gives it to his people. He is the morning star, and he gives it to them.

We don't know exactly what it will look like, but we know that it will be glorious. But it will only be for those who overcome, who persevere, who hold fast to his Word and walk and his ways. May we be such a church.