

## Revelation 2:18-29 “Thyatira: The Church of Idolatrous Tolerance”

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In 1995, the United Nations initiated an International Day of Tolerance, now celebrated annually every November 16. A day devoted to the public awareness of the principles of tolerance and the dangers posed by intolerance. Well in our text today we find a day for tolerance, actually time of tolerance, some season of tolerance within an ancient church. When we examine the text, we learn that since Jesus is intolerant of idolatry, we should repent for tolerating it.

### *Context*

The *Apocalypse* should be read as a series of seven visions that span the entire time from the 1<sup>st</sup> coming of Christ until the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming; parallel visions. Each of these seven cycles depicts the same spiritual war, each from a different perspective, a different camera angle. Yet they are not monotonous reruns. There is a progression in the parallel visions; taking us deeper and deeper into the mysterious, eternal plan of God. We are in the first vision which runs from chapters 1-3. A stunning, breathtaking vision of the resurrected and glorified Christ among seven golden lampstands, identified as the seven churches to which Jesus commands John to write. These seven churches are ancient congregations—in the days of the Roman Empire—located in the province of Asia, modern Turkey. The questions addressed in the letters are not limited to the historical seven churches, but relevant to all churches in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The number seven is symbolic, conveying the idea of perfection, completion. So the principles are relevant to the universal church throughout the Christian age: from ancient Turkey to modern the U.S.

### *The Church and City of Thyatira*

4<sup>th</sup> of these seven. Verse 18, “*And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write. Of the seven cities represented by these seven churches, Thyatira is, according to Hemer, “the least known, the least important, and the least remarkable” (Mounce, 84). The city doesn’t compare to the cultural centers of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum. Thyatira is located on the Lycus River where it intersects the Caicus and Hermus valleys. That means, the city is in the middle of nowhere. Thyatira is just a point on the map. Known for its almost accidental role in military history. Like Gettysburg, place known for a famous battle that occurred there although the city itself had no strategic value. No significance. So it is with Thyatira. The place through which the armies of antiquity passed on their way to more strategic locations. Occupied by one army only to be conquered by another. The city has no cultural prominence, no political importance.*

Instead the city is known as a manufacturing and marketing center. The city is home to many local industries including “woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths” (Mounce, 84-85). The most prominent industry is the production and dying of fabric. Bible students know of one woman in the fabric industry. She owns her own company, the Purple Cloth Company of Thyatira. We find her in the Book of Acts, Paul’s second mission trip. *One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira (Acts 16:14 NIV).* Lydia is a businesswoman from Thyatira whom Paul meets in Philippi. She is in Philippi

marketing her purple cloth. Philippi is in Macedonia. Thyatira's trade market extends all the way from modern Turkey, across the Aegean Sea into now northern Greece.

The manufacturers in Thyatira are arguably the leaders of their industries. Not just anyone is allowed to work in these businesses. To do so one has to belong to the appropriate guild associated with that industry. Trade guilds are like labor unions today. Painters are not allowed to paint unless one is a member of the Painters' Union. Welders don't weld unless part of the Welders' Union. Labor unions control Thyatira. The city is a union town. To work in Thyatira, one must belong to the union. What makes it difficult for a Christian is that belonging to the union means participating in paganism. Every aspect of life; political, social, economic, education is tied to pagan religion. Every city, every school, club, sports team, has its own representative deity. So do the trade unions. Cloth makers union has its own god—Tyrimnos identified as the Greek sun-god, Apollo. On coins, he is pictured on horseback with a battle-ax on his shoulder. At the regular meeting of the fabric industry, the members honor Tyrimnos, the god of fabric. To refuse, shows that a person is not committed to the company, unreliable, therefore unworthy of one's position in the company. Consequently, terminated. Then one is put on the Union's black list and unable to be hired in Thyatira. Unemployable. This is the situation in which these believers find themselves. Although not like the martyrdom in Pergamum, or persecution in Smyrna, Christians face a very real social pressure: Economic suicide. If one follows Christ and is faithful to Him, then one is blackballed by the union. Terminated then unemployable. Financially ruined, bankrupt.

### *Commendation*

So what does Jesus say to these Christians? Verse 19, *I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your later works exceed the first*. Notice how the church is characterized. By her love, faith, service and endurance. Corresponding virtues. The latter two are the fruit of the first two. Love is the motivating force that produces service. Faith the motivating force that produces endurance. "Thyatira's church was like a beautiful garden in which the fairest Christian graces blossomed" (Stott). Thyatirans are known for the fairest of Christian graces. We could spend considerable time talking about the first alone: love. The greatest of Christian virtues. As the apostle Paul explains to the Corinthians, *these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love* (1 Cor. 13:13). Love is the chief Christian virtue. Which corresponds to the greatest commandment: *to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength, mind and your neighbor as yourself*. Love God, love neighbor. Summary of the Ten Commandments. The first four teach us how to love God, the latter six how to love our neighbor. Love is also evidence of conversion. *They will know that you are my disciples by your love for one another*. This is the reputation of the church in Thyatira. Increasing in love. Verse 19, *I know your works ... and that your later works exceed the first*. The Thyatirans are growing in love. Totally opposite of the Ephesians who lost the love that they had at first. Ephesians regress in love. Thyatirans progress. Genuine, authentic, passionate love for the Lord that overflows in love for each other. Heart-felt affection for the people, spilling over in service to others; hosting home groups, women's Bible study, men's ministry, youth group volunteers, providing meals, showing hospitality, entertaining strangers. Wonderful works which are the fruit of love. For this kind of love, Jesus commends the church.

## Criticism

But Christ also criticizes the church, sharply. Verse 20, *But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel...* Jesus criticizes for their tolerance of a false teacher who leads the church into idolatry. Their tolerance results in idolatry. Thyatira is the church of idolatrous tolerance. Again, Thyatirans are the opposite of the Ephesians, not only in a good way, but a bad way. They are commended for growing in love, unlike the church in Ephesus. But criticized for tolerating false teaching whereas Ephesus would not. They tested those who claimed to be apostles and were not (v. 2). In Thyatira, there is the inverse situation. The Thyatirans want to make love paramount and in so doing they tolerate false teaching. Like many folk today. “It really doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you love. Theology is exclusive, harsh. We need to be inclusive, loving.” But love at the costs of truth is not Christian love, sentimentalism. One may feel sentimental, warm emotion yet tolerate the teaching of Jezebel that causes one to deny Christ. In Christianity, love and truth are not mutually exclusive. The church is not in an either/or situation. It’s both/and. *Both* love *and* truth. Greatest commandment: *Love the Lord thy God with all your...mind*. Heart and head are not disconnected. The sanctuary is not a place where you check your brain at the door. (That is Buddhism, Hinduism, different versions of pantheism. Goal of the worshipper is to achieve mindlessness). Not Christianity. So Christ severely criticizes the church because—in mindless, thoughtless sentimentality—it tolerates the teaching of Jezebel. Jezebelism is idolatrous.

Who is this Jezebel that the church tolerates? This is focus of Jesus’ criticism. Verse 20, *But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel*. Undoubtedly, there is an actual historical woman in the Thyatiran church leading the congregation astray. An attractive, charismatic, prominent woman. Yet her name is probably not Jezebel. This is just the codename that Jesus assigns the woman. In order to associate her with the most wicked of women. Her Old Testament predecessor, Jezebel. As with the church in Pergamum and the example of Balaam, we have another Old Testament narrative that sheds light on the problem in Thyatira. One thousand years prior, in northern kingdom of Israel, during the ministry of the prophet Elijah (1-2 Kgs), Jezebel was the queen of King Ahab. Ahab is a pathetic man, a weak-willed husband who allows his wife to totally dominate him. *Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him.* (1 Kgs. 21:25). In God’s eyes, Ahab sells out to evil in that he will not stand up to his wife when she incites him to lead Israel into national sin. She nags and rides him until he finally capitulates and leads the nation astray. How? By instituting Baal worship in Israel. Jezebel is an immigrant to Israel. Her father was a pagan priest. What does she import with her? Baal worship. Not just as an alternative religion, but as the new national religion. So Ahab begins the systematic elimination of Yahweh worship within Israel. Ahab’s Nazi regime murders the prophets of the Lord, even Elijah flees the land, convinced that he is the only survivor. Then Jezebel imports from Phoenicia 850 prophets of Baal, all on the government dole. The worship of Baal is programmatically instituted. Not merely sanctioned in Israel, mandatory, enforced.

Due to time and distance, perhaps we don’t see the danger. What is so bad about Baal worship? Verse 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*. Jezebel misleads Israel into sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality. Idolatry and sexual immorality. Not two types of sin in different circumstances. But one and the same sin, simultaneously. The worship of Baal

involves ritual fornication, ceremonial sex. Baal and his wife Ashtoreth are the Canaanite god and goddess of fertility. In order for the earth to be fertile, produce crops, yielding bountiful harvests, the two deities must have sexual relations. Which happens at the prompting of their worshippers. The worshippers must enact the deed. They must display what to do in order to prompt the Mr. and Mrs. Baal. At the temple of Baal, there is a helpful and trained staff of priestesses, temple prostitutes ready to guide the worshipper in his or her experience of ceremonial sex—the *hieros gamos*—the sacred union, sacred sex. The idolatry is sexually immoral, the sexual immorality is idolatrous. One and the same sin.

This is what we have going on in Thyatira. This leading lady in the church, a new Jezebel, Jezebel 2.0, is misleading these Christians into sexual immorality and idolatry. Context, Thyatira is a Union Town in the Roman Empire. Trade Unions have their own representative god. The cloth makers have their own god. The god of fabric who must be honored and adored in order to increase sales, expand the market, compete with rival cities. They go to the local pub, rent out the back room and host a feast. Then sacrifice an offering to the god of the Fabric Union, then serve the meat sacrificed to the idol for dinner. Meanwhile, very helpful priestesses who serve the god of fabric—fashion models—display the new line of purple lingerie and escort the worshipper in sacred sex. The idolatry is sexually immoral, the sexual immorality is idolatrous. One and the same sin. For those coming to Christ, they don't want anything to do with it. They want to flee from it and follow Christ while living sexually pure and chaste lives; either in a life of celibacy or monogamous marriage. But here comes the new Jezebel, like the one of old. Misleading the church, enticing to sin. "I am a prophetess. The Lord has given me a word from him. Idols aren't real. They don't exist. No such thing. So going to an idol feast, it doesn't matter. As the Apostle Paul said, All things are lawful. Besides, how can we fully appreciate the grace of God unless we plumb the deep things of Satan? We can never know how much grace abounds until we know Satan's secrets. And if you don't go and participate, it will look like you're not committed to the company. Disloyal. Unappreciative. Then you'll be blackballed by labor union, lose your job, unemployable, destitute. And God doesn't want that for you. The gospel brings prosperity. God wants you to be healthy and wealthy. God's will for you is to possess health and wealth."

So Jezebel entices these Christians to stray from Christ by teaching that it is perfectly acceptable to worship Christ and participate in pagan practices. For this, Jesus threatens to come to the church in judgment, punish this wicked witch of the east and those who embrace her teaching.

### *Tolerance*

As Enlightened moderns, we are far too sophisticated to actually fall prey to idolatry and worship a statue. Ridiculous. The idols of our day are subtler, almost undetectable. Ideas, philosophies, theories, cultural concepts. Perhaps, the greatest idol of our age is exactly what this church is guilty of: *Tolerance*. Their tolerance of Jezebel leads them into idolatry. For us, tolerance itself is the idol. *Tolerance* with a capitol "T." The idea of Tolerance, the invisible idol of Tolerance, before whom the culture bows. To whom all must answer. Whose will the culture seeks. We are fast approaching the day in which the only sin, the only vice will be, *intolerance*. The only crime of the new world order, a hate crime of highest degree. (There is a hypocritical irony in this. Those who scream loudest for tolerance are in fact most *intolerant* of Christianity. D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*).

Originally, the emergence of tolerance as a cultural phenomenon was good thing. Tolerance was promoted in Western civilization to end hostilities between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The countries of Europe do not enjoy our First Amendment, the so-called separation of church and state. European nations have state churches. After the Reformation, whether as a Protestant or Roman Catholic, a person could find oneself in the wrong country at the wrong time and persecuted for one's religion. For example, France passed the Edict of Nantes which granted religious toleration. (Incidentally, revoked in AD 1685. So no longer safe to be a Protestant in France. So my ancestors fled to Saxony because the prince of Saxony had granted religious toleration to French Huguenots). Tolerance was good.

But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after two world wars and a Holocaust, the concept of tolerance changed. In times past, to tolerate meant "to put up with, to bear with." That itself means that a person must judge something as false or wrong in order to tolerate it. If nothing is wrong with it then there is nothing to tolerate. It would be accepted, but not tolerated. Tolerance, by definition, means that one actually had to believe that an idea was untrue in order to put up with it, or *tolerate* it. But now the cultural concept of tolerance has evolved into a modern meaning. One cultural analyst states that "the true test of tolerance lies not in merely putting up with others but rather in mutual acceptance of one another." Tolerance is no longer putting up with differences but mutually accepting them as equally valid views. Very important to understand. You may say abortion is wrong, I may say it is right. Both views are to be mutually acceptable, equally valid. In other words, both true. Yet how can there be mutually exclusive truth claims that are both true at the same time? Tolerance has devoured the idea of truth. Of Americans 18-25 years old, almost 75% do not believe in such a thing as absolute truth. Truth is relative. Therefore, the need for tolerance.

The reason I belabor this is not only because of the widespread cultural ramifications, but ecclesiastical. This new definition of Tolerance was given in a speech on the subject of tolerance addressed to the church. The state church of Germany. The synod of the Evangelical Church of Germany in Berlin. Tolerance was the theme of the synod. The guest speaker went on to say, "Tolerance is now one of the fundamental questions facing the values of a modern, pluralist society, and there is an urgent need for the Church to help steer our society through the difficult waters of dealing with differences." (*EKD Bulletin*, Dec. 2005, p. 4). Do you hear the mission of the church? The Great Commission for the church is not *go and make disciples*, but to teach Tolerance. To steer society in Tolerance. It is the church that must help navigate for Tolerance. Accordingly the way to teach Tolerance is to deny differences, deny distinctions. "Christianity and Islam are the same religion. When you boil both down, Christians and Muslims really worship the same god. Jesus and Mohammed, equally awe-inspiring teachers." "Homosexuality, a lifestyle not just to put up with, bear with, but celebrated as normal. Homosexual marriage, instituted by the state." Why? Tolerance says so. Tolerance wills it. Tolerance governs. Tolerance is god that governs society.

Beloved, do you see the danger in the culture's idolatry of Tolerance? The concern is not gay marriage. Or Islam. The concern is the very survival of Christianity in Western Civilization. For if a person tolerates everything, that is, accept everything, then one stands for nothing. When you tolerate everything, you stand for nothing—including the gospel. So the church in Europe has diminished and the American shall. That is why it is so important to consider the church of Thyatira, the church of idolatrous tolerance, to whom Jesus threatens to come in judgment. The message to the church reveals that Jesus of the *Revelation* is not the Jesus of the American church. "Gentile Jesus, meek and mild, who is so exuberantly happy to share the religious stage

with Confucius or the Dali Lama.” No. Verse 23, Jesus says, *I am He who searches mind and heart*. He is the omniscient God who is intolerant of tolerance. Intolerant of idolatry, intolerant of religious pluralism, who alone is Lord and because HE IS WHO HE IS, He will share His glory with no other. He is the way, the truth and the Life, no man comes to the Father but by Him. There is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved. That is the simple message of the cross. If there are other paths to heaven, then why the cross? Then why did Jesus die? If there are other saviors—the Buddha, Krishna, or oneself through one’s own self-righteousness—then why did God the Father sacrifice His Son? He didn’t know? He couldn’t see it? If you go down that road, then you have no god. Why the cross? Why must Jesus suffer infinite wrath? Why the need for the sin of the world to be placed upon Him like a scapegoat? Why the cross? Because there is no other path to paradise, there is no other real reality, no other worldview that doesn’t ultimately implode on its own ground. No other truth-system that is internally coherent. The cross is the only way. Jesus is the one and only God-Man who can endure infinite wrath, satisfy infinite justice, and thereby reconcile us to the Father. There is no other way. And it is this Jesus who demands unadulterated fidelity from His bride, the church—both the congregation in Thyatira and ChristChurch in Atlanta.

Does it bother you to be called “homophobic, Islamophobic, sexist, bigot?” That is the question. Does it bother you to be called “intolerant?” Will you, will I, be faithful to Christ or shall we become the church of idolatrous tolerance? He who has ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. Amen.