

“Am I too Tolerant?”
Pergamum/Thyatira
Revelation 2:12-29
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He called early and asked if he could have lunch with you that day.

He said it was urgent and so you changed an appointment to accommodate him. When he showed up at the restaurant it was obvious he was distressed and as soon as the food was ordered he came right to the point.

He wanted to know if he could move into your basement for a while until he found his own place.

Your heart sank as you just knew what was coming.

You'd been friends with him and his wife long enough to notice that things weren't what they were supposed to be between them.

He said he'd finally decided to leave his wife - it had been a long time coming.

And then he spilled out a sad story of love-less-ness that existed almost from the beginning.

He said he thought he loved her when he married her but it soon became apparent that he was just temporarily infatuated.

The truth is they never had much in common and it wasn't long before they just drifted apart.

Yes, she had tried to get them to see the pastor or talk to a friend about what they might do to re-ignite their relationship but he admitted he wasn't interested.

He went on to say that his wife was a nice enough person but he just didn't want to be married to her anymore.

Yes, he knew that sounded pretty lame but certainly God didn't expect him to go through life living with someone he didn't love.

He was sure, in the long run, it would be better for her as well - after all she shouldn't have to be tied to a guy who didn't love her.

What do you say in a situation like that? What do you do?

Do you let him move into the basement?

This is your friend, do you challenge him?

Do you intervene?

What if he persists in this decision and moves out - how do you treat him then?

Since you are both members of the same church and claim to be Christians should you contact one of the pastors or elders of the church?

What should the church do if the man persists and divorces his wife?

This morning, we are continuing in our study of the book of Revelation. In the second and third chapters, John records messages Jesus gives to seven churches - seven churches in Asia Minor or what is now called Turkey.

Two weeks ago we looked at the letter Jesus wrote to the church in Ephesus.

Last week we looked at the one written to Smyrna.

In the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, the next two churches that Jesus spoke to, there was a problem.

Listen carefully to Revelation 2:12-20 and hear the problem.

What's the problem?

You have people in both churches who are teaching and acting in ways that are directly contrary to God's will for his people - idolatry and sexual immorality.

Was everyone in the church doing this?

No. To the church in Pergamum he writes,

"You have people there who hold to the teaching Balaam"

To the church in Thyatira he writes, V20

"You tolerate that woman Jezebel...By her teaching she misleads my servants..."

What was Jesus' criticism of the churches?

Was it that there were people in the church who sinned?

Well, yes of course Jesus cares about that, but what is the bigger issue?

I want you to see, when you look at the text, if you agree the bigger issue is that the church was tolerating open sin!

God's people were turning deaf ears and blind eyes to the sin going on in their very midst.

They were not challenging unholy conduct in the lives of people who claimed to be Christ-followers.

What's the problem? Godly people were doing nothing about sin.

Why do I call them "godly people"?

Look at Jesus' commendation of them both in Pergamum and Thyatira:

First of all Pergamum: 2:13 "I know where you live - where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city, where Satan lives."

As we noted last week about Smyrna so here in Pergamum Christians were a despised and persecuted minority.

Emperor worship was so strong that anyone who refused to confess that Caesar was god was subject to penalty and even death.

Imagine yourself in that place - a place, like some places in our world today where declaring yourself as a Christ-follower could mean death - no wonder it is called the place where Satan has his throne - they were in the middle of anti-Christian activity.

So real was this threat that one of their own - a man named Antipas - had actually been killed for his faith in Jesus. Now that would get your attention.

But Jesus says to the church in Pergamum - you have not renounced your faith - you have remained true to my name.

To the church in Thyatira he similarly writes, V19 "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."

These godly believers were not only remaining true to Jesus but were increasing in their spiritual maturity and service.

These are not spiritual drop-outs.

But Jesus has something "against them".

There is something going on in these churches that is so serious that, in spite of their progress and faithfulness, Jesus must correct them.

What was going on in the lives of some of the people in the church that was unchallenged?

Specifically in both cases Jesus speaks of two categories of sins:

14b and 20b Those who "sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality".

In both letters he likens those who lead the people into this sin to Old Testament characters.

He likens these renegade leaders in Thyatira to Jezebel.

Jezebel was the queen of one of Israel's worst kings - Ahab.

And she was worse than her husband - In 1st and 2nd Kings we learn that she led the people into idol worship and all sorts of immoral practices.

Jesus likens the renegade leaders in Pergamum to Balaam another Old Testament character.

In the book of Numbers, chapter 22 we find the beginning of the report on this man - Balaam.

When Moses and the Israelites were on their way from Egypt to Canaan - the Promised Land - they had to pass through the territories of Midian and Moab.

The leaders of those countries were so terrified of the Israelite army that they formed an alliance against Israel.

But still frightened they called on a man from yet another country, a man named Balaam, who apparently was known to have the power of a sorcerer - a man who could call on the gods to curse Israel and give the leaders of Moab and Midian an advantage.

Balak was the king of Moab and he is the one who sent for Balaam and he offered him money if he would put a curse on Israel.

Balaam was apparently willing but God stopped him.

At one point God literally stopped him by sending an angel to stand in the way of the donkey that Balaam was riding.

The story is humorous because the donkey sees what Balaam doesn't, and the donkey refuses to move even though Balaam beats it.

Finally the donkey, unable to move forward at Balaam's urging pushes up against the high rocks on one side of the road and pinches Balaam's foot - at that Balaam is so angry he threatened to kill the donkey.

Then God gave the donkey the ability to speak and the donkey told Balaam what Balaam should have known all along - God was stopping him. (even a donkey was smarter about spiritual things than this Balaam).

When he finally reached the place where Balak, the Moabite King wanted Balaam to be to curse the Israelites - Balaam was only able to bless them.

That happens at least three times until finally Balak sent Balaam away in frustration.

As we finish that part of the story in the book of Numbers that appears to be the end of the plot to curse Israel.

But evidently, Balaam was so enamored of the reward that Balak had offered that when he couldn't satisfy Balak's request one way he used another.

In Numbers 25 we learn "While Israel was there, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with the Moabite women, who invited them to sacrifice to their gods. The

people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the (idol-god) of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them."

So brazen was the immorality that one man even brought a Moabite woman with him right into the Tabernacle of God.

The judgment of God fell on the people that day and not only were that man and woman killed but 24,000 people died in judgment.

Now I want you to see how Balaam engineered this defeat of the Israelites. It says in chapter 31 that a group of Midianites "were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people."

What Balaam couldn't accomplish by direct means he accomplished indirectly - by encouraging the people to have both their relationship to God and their relationship to those things that were contrary to God.

I want you to notice that what happened in Israel in Balaam's day, what happened in Pergamum and Thyatira in John's day and what happens in the church today IS NOT that people who formerly called themselves Christians "chuck " it all and leave the church.

IT IS that they think they can have it all - they can belong to God and still live anyway they choose.

Those Israelites in Numbers hadn't left the People of Israel - they even still came to the Tabernacle/Temple to worship -
they wanted their idol worship, their immorality AND their relationship to God.

Those Balaam/Jezebel followers in Pergamum/Thyatira hadn't left the church - they just didn't see any contradiction between what they were doing and what they said they believed - or it didn't matter that there was a contradiction.

Of course they believed in God, in Jesus, that he died for them, that they were forgiven by his grace through faith.

In fact that gave them all the more security - they belonged to God by grace - it didn't really matter if they did things that might otherwise be inappropriate.

And of course living in the difficult circumstances of their city, made it much more true that to "get along you have to go along."

They separated their actions from their belief system.
They separated life and faith.

They compartmentalized themselves so that in one compartment they held Jesus and their beliefs about him and in another compartment they held the real world in which they lived.

And as long as they had the two separated they could live in the real world pretty much as they pleased without being bothered by what they said they believed.

What does it look like today?

Too many even in the church say they believe in Jesus but they aren't Christ-followers.

And when truth and ethics are disconnected, when belief and conduct are separated morality breaks down.

Price gouging in business is OK as long as everybody is doing it.

Just this week I had a funeral home in the area charge a family \$860 to rent a hearse and have two guys show up and stand here at Southern Gables for two hours. When I asked them about the exorbitant amount the excuse was that everyone does it.

How many Christians will sell defective homes or automobiles or other things to unsuspecting buyers in order to get as much as the traffic will bear - and think that is just the intelligent way to do business in America - after all that's free enterprise at work.

How many think nothing of jockeying for position in their business or job or socially by casting aspersions on someone else's character - just so they will be thought of more highly.

Who in our churches are twisting the Bible texts to get us to think that homosexual practice isn't wrong as long as two people are committed to each other?

How many are trying to get us to believe that sex outside of marriage is all right if the two people truly love each other?

Even recreational sex is OK as long as nobody gets hurt?

How many Christians are regularly putting their hobbies, their sports, their work, their recreation, or just their self-indulgence ahead of Jesus' clear desire for his people to regularly meet together for worship and encouragement?

How many Christians are feeding on the profanity, vulgarity, immorality, and unholy attitudes, ideas and behaviors portrayed in so much of television and movies today - with no thought for the damage it is doing to their own souls, to the damage their modeling is doing to others, and the affront it is to a holy God?

While it is true that God accommodates divorce in those cases where adultery or dissolution occur, for some in our church as in the culture at large, divorce is now perceived as perfectly legitimate, even the best thing to do, for almost any reason.

The test of the legitimacy of divorce today is in how it makes a person feel. "It feels right", "I'm happier", "My kids are happier", "I've never been closer to God" and a lot of other rationalizing drivel is spouted by those who have disconnected their beliefs from their lives.

No, maybe idol worship and temple prostitution aren't part of our everyday culture but self-indulgence and immorality are still very present.

Who is willing to step up and say "This is wrong!" - "This is an affront to a holy God, this mars the image of God in people, this scandalizes the church of Jesus Christ?"

And Jesus' challenge to the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira was that they, the churches, the Christ-followers, were doing nothing about it.

Why not? Why were these practices going unchallenged?

Apparently as in our day, they had convinced themselves that toleration is a greater virtue than holiness or love.

After all didn't Jesus say, "He who is without sin should cast the first stone". Isn't he the one who said, "Judge not lest you be judged."

If you will read Matthew 7 carefully you will see clearly that Jesus' condemnation of judging was a condemnation of "judgmentalism".

Jesus was opposed to proud, holier-than-thou, criticism of others - he was not opposed, in fact he urged, gentle, loving correction of each other.

Have we become so afraid of being regarded as judgmental as legalistic that we are afraid to call sin "sin"?

Is it possible that fear is not the reason we don't care about the rising disregard of God's word in our churches - but that the reason is we don't care enough what will happen to Christians who live that way?

Or is it possible that our own sense of right and wrong has been so corrupted, so vague that we don't know where we stand on many issues?

Has "live and let live" become the modus operandi of the evangelical church?

Parents are not willing to tell their children when things are wrong.
Friends are more concerned about being liked than confronting in love.

Churches are more afraid of being perceived as rigid, legalistic, fundamentalists than caring enough about the people to call them to holiness.

Remember, it is not those Christians who were living unholy lives that Jesus here chastised - it is those Christ-followers who were doing nothing about it.

What does Jesus say to do? REPENT! Do things differently.

What does that mean? Go on a "witch-hunt"?

Set up little KGB units throughout the church, encourage children to tell on their parents?

Publicly chastise everyone who is doing anything wrong?

Of course not!

Jesus makes it very clear in the Bible what we are to do.

I don't have time today to spell this out but listen to just some of what he says we are to do:

Gal 6:1 "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him GENTLY."

2 Corinthians 5 In your correction of a brother, "forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by sorrow. I urge you therefore to reaffirm your love for him."

Even in one of the strongest passage in the Bible on discipline of a believer, God says, correct him "so that...his spirit (may) be saved on the day of the Lord."

And in the longest and most detailed instruction on discipline in the New Testament - in Matthew 18 - Jesus makes it clear that the purpose of correction is to correct - the purpose of discipline is to heal.

Pity the child who has a parent who doesn't love him enough to say "no" and back it up with loving discipline.

Pity the man or woman who doesn't have a person who is friend enough to say "no" and back it up with loving correction.

And Jesus says pity the church that doesn't care enough for its people to say "no" and back it up with gentle, affirming, loving, and yet firm discipline.

I well remember the woman who, about a year ago, attended our Partnership classes and when she heard about church discipline - she called me later and said the church has no business knowing or commenting on how people live their personal lives - and she quit the class and stopped coming to the church.

Try as I would, I could not convince her that love is a higher value than toleration.

In the church of Jesus Christ we are to love people enough to care about their lives.

We get a sense of how important this is to Jesus when we hear what he says to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira:

I think I'm right when I say Jesus' warning is: "You begin to care enough to discipline and bring about a change or I will come in judgment not only on those who violate God's laws but also in judgment on the church.

I know it is not politically correct to threaten or warn but no matter how I try to get around it - to me, it looks like a warning and it comes from God.

God is calling us to be concerned about sin in our lives and the lives of those who call themselves Christ-followers.

And the concern is to be expressed not in judgmentalism but in caring enough to confront - loving enough to correct.

What about the man who is leaving his wife and asks to stay in your basement? What do you say and what do you do?

I don't know specifically - but I do know that saying nothing and doing nothing is not an option.

What is the church to do about those who claim to be Christians but are willfully, flagrantly, defiantly ignoring God's will? We must confront.

God help us do it and do it with the love and grace of the Lord Jesus.

Do we love God and each other enough to call sin "sin"?