

THE TOLERANT CHURCH

Back when I was in High School there was a movie called Breaking Away about a kid who was into bike racing. A few friends and I decided that we should go on a long distance bike ride. I am not talking about motorcycles, I am talking plain old 10 speed bikes. We went from Sarnia to Grand Bend and then back – a distance of about 150 kms. When we reached Grand Bend I was thirsty, so we stopped at a corner store and got something to drink. I thought a cold chocolate milk sounded good. Let me tell you, it was not a nice trip back. That chocolate milk got shaken up inside me and eventually came out. It was a bad choice for a beverage. It made me sick.

Ever watch segments of a marathon race? If you have you've probably noticed marathon runners being handed drinks along the way. Usually it's water, Gatorade or something similar. One thing you won't find is runner being handed Mt. Dew or Red Bull or Starbucks coffee during a race. Those drinks are loaded with caffeine and caffeine is naturally dehydrating. Marathon runners are careful what they take into their bodies because they know that eating or drinking the wrong foods before or during a race can knock you right out of it. That is true in running a marathon, but it is also true of running the race of faith. The church has to be very careful of what it allows in it's body.

Today we are continuing in our series 7 Churches looking at the 7 Churches of Revelation.

Revelation 2:18-29 To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. 20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. 24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): 25 Only hold on to what you have until I come. 26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations -- 27 'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery' -- just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Notice from this map that as we visit the 7 churches of Revelations that we are moving in a circle, starting from the bottom in Ephesus and moving clockwise.

Thyatira was located was on an important trade route. The economy at the time was doing really well. Things were good. The church was growing and things were moving forward. It had struggled in the beginning but it was finally on track and they were “doing more than at first.” Things were looking good. Unfortunately, that is often when the problems start. It has been said that a growing church is like a squirrel in the fall, they gather every nut from miles around.

As the church began to grow, the devil stepped in and tried to destroy it. He did not attack the church from the outside, but from within.

Notice here that Jesus is described as having eyes like blazing fire and feet like burnished bronze. His footing is firm and His eyes are piercing. He is standing on the truth and from that perspective He sees everything. His footing is on the rock, from there He can hold on to us no matter what the storm.

Years ago at Niagara Falls two men were in a boat and found themselves caught in the current. The men jumped from their boat and swam for the shore. At the last minute ropes from the shore were thrown out to them. The one man grabbed a rope and was pulled to shore. The other man grabbed a rope, but at the same instant the rope came into his hand, a log floated by him. The thoughtless and confused man, instead of seizing the rope, laid hold on the log. It was a fatal mistake. They were both in imminent peril, but the one was drawn to shore because he had a connection to the land. The other, clinging to the log, was carried over the falls and was killed.

The fact that Jesus is standing on the truth and His eyes see into the heart is bad news for those who are living their life on the slippery slope of compromise or tolerance. This is bad for those who are pretending to be one way but in their hearts is something else. I think the key word here is the word 'tolerate.' It was not just that false teaching had crept into the church, it was the fact that the church knew about it and was allowing it to happen.

How do you recognize a false teacher? Let me give you 4 marks of a false teacher;

1. Seeks Titles – calls herself a prophetess

It says that the church was tolerating "The woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess." Notice those words "she calls herself..." She refers to herself as a prophetess – a female prophet. It was not that the church was recognizing her prophetic gifting and calling and then appointing her to the office of prophetess. She was grasping this position for herself, and the church was allowing it to happen.

False teachers always seek titles. They want to be recognized as something special in the church. They seek to elevate themselves into positions of leadership. This is why it is so important in the church that we are careful about the selecting of leadership. E.g. Kuwait.

1 Timothy 5:22 Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands ...

Remember, this is Jesus who is speaking. This woman is standing up before the church and saying, "I speak for God. I am a prophet. My words are God's words." Jesus is saying "No your not, you do not speak for me. You are not speaking for God."

The church was tolerating some bad teaching. Jesus calls this woman Jezebel. In the Old Testament we remember the story of a wicked queen named Jezebel who led the nation of Israel into idol worship, the worship of a false god. The insinuation here is that this woman in the church was doing the same thing, she was leading people away from God.

2. Speaks Lies – misleading teaching

Next it says that "By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols." False teaching leads to false actions. The people were deceived and they were falling into immorality and doing things they knew were wrong.

It is interesting that this is not the first time the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols has come up. In the early days of the Apostle Paul's ministry, questions arose among the leaders of the church who were residing in Jerusalem about what to do with all these new Gentile Christians. They brought with them many issues as a result of growing up in the Roman culture. There was a big debate about how to handle this, so the leadership of the church met in Jerusalem and a decision was reached.

Acts 15:19-20 (MSG) So here is my decision: We're not going to unnecessarily burden non-Jewish people who turn to the Master. 20 We'll write them a letter and tell them, 'Be careful to not get involved in activities connected with idols, to guard the morality of sex and marriage, to not serve food offensive to Jewish Christians -- blood, for instance.'

There were the two things the gentile Christians were specifically asked not to do. One was to avoid sexual immorality. The second was to avoid meat sacrificed to idols. The exact two things this false teacher was endorsing. That is how you recognize a false teacher. Whatever the leadership of the church says, they say the opposite.

Computer viruses are malicious programs, intentionally developed by people to steal from you and destroy your property. They are often downloaded stealthily, without you knowing it. Perhaps opening an email attachment or surfing the web. When you combine intelligent effort with evil desire the result is always misery. The devil come to steal, kill and destroy. False teachers are the agents the devil uses to bring his virus of destruction into the church.

3. Self Deception – unwilling to repent

Jesus goes on to say of this woman “I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.” She had an unrepentant heart. She did not think what she was doing was wrong. She was not only deceiving others, she was self-deceived.

One of the ways you identify a false teacher is that they are not teachable. Whenever I look for a person for a leadership role in the church I look for 4 things, is the person faithful, available, teachable and responsive to leadership. All four of these qualities must be present in leadership.

A person who is not teachable is always a problem. People who think that they know everything and require no correction are a cancer to the body of Christ. Pride and arrogance are not traits compatible with Christian service. You cannot fill something that is already full.

Remember that this was a church where things were going pretty well. The church was growing. The church was having an impact. At times like that many churches are willing to put up with things they know are wrong because they do not want to stop the growth. They are not wanting to speak out because they are afraid it will lead to division.

We are one in Christ; let us be friends with one another; but let us never be friends with one another's error. If I be wrong, rebuke me sternly; I can bear it, and bear it cheerfully and if ye be wrong, expect the like measure from me, and neither peace nor parley with your mistakes. Let us all be true to one another, and true to Christ; and as soon as we perceive an error, though it be but as the shadow of one, let us root it out and drive it from us, lest it plague the whole body, and put leprosy into the entire fabric of the church. – Charles H Spurgeon

4. Spiritual Elitism – so-called deep secrets

The last thing that Jesus addresses is spiritual elitism. Jesus encourages those who have not fallen for her false teaching. Those who “do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets.” What does that mean ‘deep secrets.’ One of the ways you identify a false teacher is that they claim to have new information that other Christians just do not understand. They have a deeper revelation, a greater understanding, a higher experience.

Naomi and I were once speaking to a person who had gotten involved in the Crossroads Church of Christ. They believed that only people that were baptized in that church were saved. I asked them, “what about all the saints from history? What about Augustine, and Luther and Billy Graham? None of them are saved because they did not follow your secret formula of baptism?” How do you know that something is a cult? They say ‘only we have the truth, and no one else until now has ever discovered it.’

The problem with the whole idea of ‘greater revelation’ is whether you are hearing comes from God or from the devil. The bible is clear that everything we need to life and salvation is found within it’s pages. If someone comes along and says they have anything to add to the bible or take away from the bible, that is a problem.

Revelation 22:18-19 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. 19 And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

We are not to be dazzled, as many people are, by the person, gifts or office of teachers in the church. They may come to us with great dignity, authority and scholarship. They may be bishops or archbishops, university professors or even the pope himself. But if they bring a gospel other than the gospel preached by the apostles and recorded in the New Testament, they are to be rejected. We judge them by the gospel; we do not judge the gospel by them. -- John Stott

After many years of ministry in different denominations and settings, I have seen that there are many Christians who practice this kind of spiritual elitism. They are always pushing some new revelation. They are never satisfied with the truth. Don’t get me wrong, I am all for staying current. We need to follow God wherever His spirit is leading. However, when I hear someone say that they have found something in God that no one else has ever experienced, some deep new understanding that will revolutionize ministry forever, the red flags go up. We seek Jesus, not experience.

Luke 10:17-20 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." 18 He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. 19 I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. 20 However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

There is nothing deeper than loving Jesus with all your heart soul mind and strength. There is no deeper truth than loving your neighbour as yourself. There is no greater joy than the fact that Jesus has saved you and that your name is written in heaven.

Jesus has very strong word of warning for this woman, and also for the church that was tolerating her teaching. There are two things here that the church must always be careful to balance, truth and tolerance. Speaking the truth in love. Most people tend to lean in one direction or the other.

Truth without love is legalism. It is faith without fun. Souls without a smile. People without joy. This is the error of the Pharisees. They used the scriptures as a weapon. The most spiritually mature people I have ever met are also the most gracious.

Many of you have been to Arlington National Cemetery. It's impressive. The manicured lawn and architecture delights. Green grass that's neatly trimmed – all blades at the same height. The headstones no matter where you're standing make a pattern, diagonal lines, straight or horizontal lines. There's shimmering light. They're perfectly neat. Not a piece of trash in the whole place. It's neat and clean and orderly and as beautiful as any place you've ever seen. You can look at it and almost forget it's a cemetery. Likewise, legalism looks good but it's death inside.

Colossians 2:23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Some of you here may remember growing up in churches with angry preachers and angry people. Long lists of rules and regulations, but little love. Truth without love is legalism.

On the other hand, love without truth is liberalism. The problem with this position is it overlooks the seriousness of sin. People who believe in love without truth have a hard time of calling anything a sin. Just love people and don't judge and everything will be OK. Liberalism compromises the truth. It says "God wants you to be happy, so just do what you want." That kind of freedom only leads to bondage.

You have to balance love and truth. Remember the story of the woman who was caught in adultery.

John 8:7-11 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 No one, sir, she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

He forgives her sin, but then tells her to leave her life of sin. Both love and truth.

So how do I find this balance? How do I know where I stand in this balance? How do I know I am holding both grace and truth? You ask yourself a few questions, kind of like filters as we go about making decisions.

a. What Does the Bible Say?

What is the truth according to God's word for this issue? What examples does the scriptures give concerning this? Is this a major or minor issue biblically. There are lots of things that are black and white in the bible. There are other things that are more grey. That does mean that they are not important, simply that you have to be careful saying "thus says the Lord."

There's a principle you've heard here before. In major issues, have unity. In minor issues, have diversity. And in all issues show charity. That means love. Speak the truth in love. There is a way to say things and a way not to say things.

Like one guy said to his girlfriend, “When I look at your face time stands still.” Another guy wanted to say the same thing said, “You have a face that could stop a clock.” Whole different deal if you say it wrong. Speak the truth in love.

b. What is my Heart Saying?

God speaks to our hearts. So ask yourself what are your convictions about this issue. There are some things biblically that are left to the individual to decide, based upon their own level of faith.

We have already talked about the fact that eating food sacrificed to idols was wrong. It was wrong because it reminded the Gentile believers of how they lived before they came to Christ. The eating of food that had clearly been sacrificed to idols was a stumbling block for them. The problem was that often it was difficult to determine what meat had been sacrificed to idols and what meat had not. Food sacrificed to idols was sold everywhere in the marketplace, usually next to food that had not been sacrificed. For the Gentile believers, this presented a problem. How could they know which was which?

Romans 14:14 As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

The issue was not the food, it was the understanding that associated it. If the person thought the food had not been sacrificed to idols, then it was fine to eat. If they thought it had been sacrificed to idols, then it was a stumbling block to them.

We have people in this church that have faced alcohol addiction. When they came to Christ they struggled to get free from that addiction. For a person who has never experienced that, a glass of wine for dinner is not really an issue. For the person who has struggled with alcoholism, it is a problem because it represents more than just a glass of wine, it represents a lifestyle and industry that destroys people. When seeking the balance between truth and grace you must ask yourself, what are my personal convictions? What is my conscience saying about this issue?

c. Who Will This Impact?

What are the practical implications of this decision? It is easy to debate theology in a vacuum. It is harder to practice truth in a pastoral way that seeks to bless people. The Christian faith must be lived in community. You are not an island, you are part of a family. What each one of us does has an impact on those around us.

Paul reminds us that, even though something may not be an issue for you personally, that does not make it OK. Like the example of the wine, just because you do not have a problem with it does not mean that you should do it in front of someone who does have a problem with it.

Romans 14:20-23 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. 22 So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

1 Corinthians 8:13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

We have to evaluate everything we do not just in terms of how it impacts us, but in terms of how it impacts others as well.

1 Thessalonians 5:22 Abstain from all appearance of evil.

This does not mean that we need to become slaves to the perceptions of others. There will always be things we do that look wrong to others. There will always be people who misinterpret our motives. It means that, whenever possible, we are mindful of others.

d. Will it Reflect My Love for Jesus?

Remember that love is at the core of everything we do. Therefore you need to ask if the decisions you are making are loving or not. Remember, love is not always giving a person what they want, it is giving a person what they need. For an addict, the loving thing is not giving them more drugs. It is not supporting their habit. It is saying “enough is enough” and denying their requests.

e. What Would my Spiritual Mentor Do?

Spiritual mentors are important. In my life I have had several people that have really guided my life and shaped my faith. There are time I sit back and ask myself the question “I wonder how this person would address this issue.”

1 Corinthians 4:15-16 Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

1 Corinthians 11:1 Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

That means we should all be mentored. Spend time with mature believers. Learn from their example.

Again, ultimately you can only balance love and truth if you first know the truth. The best defense the church has against false teaching is a knowledge of the truth. We all have to be students of the bible.

A few weeks ago I saw a Facebook video that highlighted this. A man put a post on Facebook quoting Luke 4:7 “If you worship me it will all be yours.” Then he put “comment amen if you agree with this.” Over 600 people responded to the post. Of those that responded, 97% of them said amen, they agreed with words that were quoted. The problem is that these were words straight out of the mouth of the devil. He used these words to try to tempt Jesus into worshipping him. Almost 600 people blindly said amen to something satan said. Why? Because they did not know their bible.