

“TOO TOLERANT”
REVELATION 2:18-29

Several years ago, a man named Neale Donald Walsch wrote a book entitled, *Conversations with God*, that quickly became a publishing phenomenon. It was on the *New York Times* Best-Sellers list for an astonishing 137 weeks, prompting Walsch to write a series of sequels which were also bestsellers. Walsch said that at a low period in his life he wrote an angry letter to God asking a number of questions about why his life wasn't working. While writing, he heard a voice over his shoulder say: "Do you really want answers to these questions or are you just venting?" Though when he turned around, he saw no one, Walsch said that his mind was immediately flooded with answers to those questions, which he wrote down. The ensuing "dialogue" became the manuscript for the *Conversations with God* books.

These books address many of the questions that thoughtful people have about religion, love, relationships, morality, sin, guilt, forgiveness, sex, money, and marriage, and Walsch claims that the contents of his books are God's definitive answers.

So, with regard to religion, for example, God said, *"Allow each soul to walk its path...Yet know this: there is no such thing as an incorrect path - for on this journey you cannot 'not get' where you are going...This is what Jesus did. It is the path of the Buddha, the way of Krishna, the walk of every Master who has appeared on the planet. And every Master has likewise the same message: What I am, you are. What I can do, you can do."*

Regarding morality, God told Walsch, *"Listen to your feelings. Listen to your Highest Thoughts. Listen to your experience."* *"There are no 'shoulds' or 'shouldn'ts' in God's world. Do what you want to do. Do what reflects you, what represents you as a grander version of your Self...I have never set down a 'right' or 'wrong,' a 'do' or a 'don't.' To do so would be to strip you completely of your greatest gift – the opportunity to do as you please... There are no such things as the Ten Commandments."* (Walsch, *Conversations with God, Book 1*, pp. 8, 38-39, 95).

In *Conversations with God for Teens*, Walsch writes, *"When a girl asks the question 'Why am I a lesbian?' [God's] answer is that she was 'born that way' because of genetics (just as you were born right-handed, with brown eyes, etc.). Then he tells her to go out and 'celebrate' her differences."*

Another girl poses the question *"I am living with my boyfriend. My parents say that I should marry him because I am living in sin. Should I marry him?"* His reply is, *"Who are you sinning against? Not me, because you have done nothing wrong."*

Walsch raised another question with God about forgiveness of sin. God's reply? *"I do not forgive anyone because there is nothing to forgive. There is no such thing as right or wrong and that is what I have been trying to tell everyone, do not judge people. People have chosen to judge one another and this is wrong, because the rule is 'judge not lest ye be judged.'"*

These are but a few of things that were "revealed" to Walsch as he supposedly recorded God's answers to his questions. Those published "conversations" turned Walsch into an international celebrity. Millions of people enthusiastically embraced Walsch's "new" truth. He even won over a surprising number of professing Christians, including a dear friend of ours who gave us the book, claiming it had changed her life. Indeed, she is now a Buddhist.

But I submit to you that none of what Walsch wrote is new, and it's not merely because he was disgraced after it came out that he had plagiarized some of his material. It's because his "truth" is just another variation of the same old recycled material that Satan reintroduces

every few generations. Because he knows that this version appeals to people's natural inclinations and sensibilities. He also knows that if he can somehow blend this material into the doctrines of the church, it will eventually dilute our faith and destroy our witness.

This morning we are going to look at a passage that describes how this happened to a church in the first century, what it did to that church, what Jesus thought and felt about it, and what he planned to do about it. Jesus addresses them in **verse 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.’*

Thus far we have studied the messages to three churches in three magnificent cities. Ephesus: ‘The Supreme Metropolis of Asia’; Smyrna: ‘The Pride of Asia’; and Pergamum: ‘The Capitol of Asia’. The city of Thyatira had the distinct privilege of being the *armpit of Asia*. It was the least important, least sophisticated, least attractive of all the cities. It was small and obscure.

Originally built as a military outpost, it was established for the purpose of protecting Pergamum. If an army wanted to invade Pergamum, they would have to go through Thyatira, and the folks who lived there were paid to provide enough resistance that the enemy would be discouraged from going any further and assaulting the capitol city.

Consequently, Thyatira was known as “the other city.” The one that could be destroyed and people would shrug their shoulders and say, “That’s too bad, but thank goodness Pergamum was saved.”

Naturally, the residents of Thyatira didn’t like the reputation of being “the other city”, so what they lacked in cultural and social greatness they tried making up for in commercial enterprise. It was the original city of Industry. A center of trade for wool, weaving, tanning, baking, and a number of other textile industries. It was famous for manufacturing a purple dye that was distributed all over the world (You might remember that it was the hometown of Lydia, a dealer in purple goods, whom Paul had converted while in Philippi). It was also a city that was famous for its bronze refinery.

Thyatira was the quintessential blue collar town, and, not surprisingly, there were a number of trade guilds, much like today’s unions, that were an important part of the resident’s lives and identities.

Jesus begins by identifying Himself as the Son of God, emphasizing His absolute authority. Then He describes Himself as one who has eyes of flaming fire. If that sounds a bit frightening it is intended to be. Those eyes are piercing and penetrating. He sees everything that is going on, not just on the surface, but on the inside. Those eyes are also purifying. His gaze is righteous and holy, and it brings to light even the hidden sins of our lives.

Finally, Jesus says, “My feet are like burnished bronze.” The church in Thyatira would know the significance of this metaphor, for they had seen this metal shine when being refined. Here, as elsewhere in apocalyptic literature, burnished bronze represents the righteousness and justice of Jesus.

Keep in mind that these descriptions of Jesus are directly related to the church’s spiritual condition and Jesus’ message to it. Look what he says in **verse 19**. ¹⁹ *“I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.”*

This church had a lot of good things going for it. They had everything the church in Ephesus had, plus they possessed what Ephesus lacked - love. What is more, they practiced the perseverance of Smyrna, and the faith of Pergamum. I picture a group of people who

were deeply devoted to the Lord Jesus and to one another. They were an intimate, loving fellowship that put their confidence in the Lord and endured hardship with grace.

And they were progressing, too. Jesus says, *“Your latter works exceed the first.”* They were not backsliding, and they were not stagnant. They were moving forward and making progress.

From these descriptions you might be able to deduce that the church at Thyatira was a picture of spiritual health. And yet Jesus proceeds to give them a spiritual diagnosis that must have taken some of them by surprise. **Verse 20** *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.*

What was the problem in the church? They were *too tolerant*. In particular they were tolerant of a woman identified as Jezebel. Does the name ring a bell? Since much of Revelation is written in symbolic language, it is likely this was not her real name. It was probably an influential woman in the church who possessed similar traits to the literal Jezebel in the Old Testament who was the domineering wife of King Ahab, one of the most wicked kings of Israel. She was a foreigner who imported her gods to Israel and imposed her religion upon the people. She was a sorceress, a cold-blooded murderer, and arguably the most wicked, most defiant, and most treacherous person in the entire Bible.

Yet she had an uncanny ability to win friends and influence people. She must have had charisma. I'll bet she was beautiful. I'll bet she had a way with words. But woe be to those who got on her bad side because she was volatile and vicious and vengeful. And perhaps that's why she was so successful in getting her own way. People were intimidated by her.

Imagine what a serious thing it was for Jesus to identify someone in the church at Thyatira as Jezebel. But apparently there was a woman in the church that bore a striking resemblance to her. Here's what we know about her: She identified herself as a prophetess; that is, she claimed that her words were God's words. This, in itself, was not unusual. In every church there were prophets and prophetesses, who would regularly give a word from the Lord.

That was acceptable if it was done by the enablement of the Spirit. But the New Testament warns us to be discerning of prophetic messages - to compare those messages with the Apostles' teaching to make sure they did not contradict what God had authoritatively revealed through the Apostles.

Apparently, the church at Thyatira either lacked discernment or courage, for it is evident that Jezebel was promoting ideas and practices that clearly contradicted God's Word. By so doing, she was leading people astray. **Verse 20b.** *“[She] is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.*

Many scholars think that “Jezebel” was encouraging Christians to maintain their memberships in the trade guilds that were so prominent in Thyatira. That may seem to us a rather small thing, except that these trade guilds were linked to idols and immorality.

Each guild had its own patron “god” to whom it paid homage in exchange for economic blessing. When the members met (and meetings were mandatory for members) it was customary to begin each gathering with a big barbeque. No big deal, right? Well, before that meat ever hit the grill it was butchered by one of the priests of a local temple, who, in the process of preparing it, performed some rituals thinking that by so doing the meat would be infused with that god's presence. Consuming that meat, then, was considered an act of worship to that god.

But it wasn't just eating meat sacrificed to idols that was problematic. The copious consumption of alcohol was also part of these feasts, and members believed that if they did not become intoxicated during the feast their "god" would not be pleased with them and would not bless their businesses. So, getting drunk was considered an act of worship as well.

But there's more. The members of these trade guilds believed their patron deity wanted them to have sex with other members, and if they did so it would be good for business.

Christ-followers, then, were faced with a choice. They knew these trade guild get-togethers were displeasing to God, yet not to participate meant they would have to withdraw their membership and join the ranks of the unemployed. It was a choice with consequences.

That is, until Jezebel proposed a solution. Claiming to be a prophetess and prefacing her remarks with "Thus saith the Lord," she said something like this: "This is not as black and white an issue as you might think. It's not either/or; it's both/and. The Lord has revealed to me some of His deep secrets, among which are that it doesn't matter what you eat, how much you drink, or who you have sex with. Those are physical things and as such they are totally unrelated to your spiritual life. Don't forget, Jesus Himself was called a glutton and a drunkard, and so, these trade guild meetings are a wonderful opportunity to be like Jesus.

"Besides, if we withdraw our memberships, people in our community are going to think we're being intolerant and judgmental, and they'll never be attracted to Jesus. Besides, what kind of testimony would we have if we were all unemployed and living in poverty. We've got to be financially stable to be credible. We've got to get along in order to make society work."

But Jesus didn't think too much of Jezebel's justifications. Look at **verse 21**. ***²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.***

Notice, Jesus had been patient, even with Jezebel. He had graciously given her an opportunity to repent of her sin. But she was not responsive to His grace and refused. Therefore, **verse 22a**. ***"Behold I will throw her onto a sickbed..."***

That sickbed is very likely a play on words, referring to the dining couches on which members reclined to eat and drink and upon which they committed sexual immorality at those trade guild gatherings. But Jesus says, "You will lie down on another kind of bed, from which you will not be able to rise." Jesus is going to afflict "Jezebel" with an ailment of some kind that is intended to be punishment for her sin and treachery.

But he doesn't stop there. **Verse 22b-23a**. ***"...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.***

The phrase, "those who commit adultery with her" is likely a figure of speech, referring to those who have betrayed and forsaken their fiancé, Jesus, and have made an unholy alliance with Jezebel. It's a reference to those who have followed her diabolical advice, rather than the teachings of the Lord Jesus, and, as a result, have morally compromised their lives. And if they don't repent, Jesus is going to punish them severely. He will strike her children dead. These "children" is a reference to Jezebel's disciples.

And one of the reasons Jesus will punish these professing Christians is stated in **verse 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."***

What is Jesus saying? That sin is serious business. That He hates it. He always has and always will. Sin arouses His wrath; sin will incur His judgment. Yes, He is not willing that any should perish - that all should come to repentance, but He will punish those who do not repent. And He wants other churches to know this, so they won't experience the same fate

as those at Thyatira.

Someone wrote, "I can't handle the God of the Old Testament, smoke pouring out of His nostrils, coals of fire spitting from His mouth. No thanks. I'll stick with Jesus. Jesus who 'loves the little children, all the children of the world' and never raises His voice. You can have all that yelling and stomping as far as I'm concerned. I'm a New Testament person. I'm a Jesus Christian." (Eugene Peterson writing facetiously in the forward to *Jesus Mean and Wild* by Mark Galli, p.9).

Not long after the Christian church was formed, men and women began talking like this. They loved Jesus but separated him from the vengeful God who incinerated Sodom and Gomorrah. They were endeared to Jesus but distanced themselves from the crude Semitic deity who created snakes and mosquitoes and terrified little children with threats of fire and brimstone (Ibid, 9).

Years ago, there was a man who vigorously waged a publicity campaign to save Jesus from every hint of divine tantrum and supernatural whim and whimsy that seems so prevalent in the Old Testament. So, he devised a concept of a thoroughly nice Jesus, a Jesus who would never get angry and never condemn or judge; a Jesus who was altogether different than the God who seemed impatient and vindictive. Of course, he had to get rid of the Old Testament, he had to purge large portions of the Gospels, and he had to significantly edit the Apostle Paul's writings.

But for all his good intentions, this man, Marcion, now holds the uncontested position as the church's pioneer heretic, who was excommunicated from the church by his own father, the Bishop of Sinope.

But the ghost of Marcion is still with us. In our eagerness to make Jesus more attractive to ourselves and others we edit Him to our own convenience. We emphasize the positive, uplifting, endearing aspects of His character and delete the things that are disagreeable or unpleasant. But in so doing, we reduce Jesus to a figment of our finite imaginations.

The fact is; however, Jesus is not only the compassionate Savior who invited children to sit on His lap; He is the One of whom Scripture says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God...for our God is a consuming Fire" (Heb. 10:31; 12:29). If these concepts seem contradictory - if we cannot reconcile or wrap our minds around both of them at the same time - it doesn't mean that one of them is false and we ought to discard it. It means that there is a deficiency in our capacity to fully comprehend Him. We need to believe and affirm all of what Scripture reveal about Jesus and ask God to open our minds to give us greater comprehension.

And we must take Jesus' warning seriously, too. For the spirit of Jezebel is alive and well in our day. She misleads us into thinking that we can love the world and Jesus too; that we can spend all our efforts building up treasures on earth and still have treasures in heaven; that we can follow the world's advice, play the world's games, adopt the world's values, and indulge in the world's pleasures without guilt or shame and without any consequences.

We need to be vigilant. Look at what Jesus says, **verses 24-27**. *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. 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.*

What is Jesus asking of those who have not embraced the devious teaching of Jezebel? He simply tells them to "hold fast to what they have until He comes." What do they

have? The undiluted Truth! The truth about Jesus. The truth about the Father and the Spirit. The truth about the kingdom. The truth about how Jesus wants us to live and what Jesus wants us to do. That truth is sufficient to guide us and keep us on the path that Jesus paved until He comes.

And those who stay on the path, those, in the words of Jesus, who conquer and keep His works until the end are assured of several rewards. First, they will be given authority over the nations and will rule in some capacity. This is a position of great honor and responsibility.

Second, **verse 28**, ²⁸ *And I will give Him the morning star*. This phrase is found only one other place in the New Testament. In Revelation 22 Jesus identifies Himself as the Bright and Morning Star. He is the Star in this passage, and He is promising to give Himself to His faithful followers. We shall behold Him and be with Him and embrace Him and delight in Him for all eternity.

Jesus says finally, **Verse 29** ²⁹ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* What is the Spirit saying? Sin and error are serious business. If we are flirting with it, entertaining it, or embracing it we need to quit and repent! We must realize how it affects Jesus. We must be aware that He won't put up with it in our midst. We are to be holy and righteous and pure.

That is not easy in a culture in which Walsch's diabolical doctrines have been swallowed hook, line, and sinker. The fact is, most people in our culture now believe what he plagiarized - that it doesn't matter what you believe or what you do, that there is no such thing as sin, except, of course, the sin of being intolerant or judgmental, and that there are many paths that lead to God.

Our challenge is to cling to Jesus and hold fast to His Word.

Too Tolerant Revelation 2:18-29

Main Idea: Jesus does not tolerate habitual sin in His church, and will severely judge churches that do.



Jesus the Judge (18)
Eyes like blazing fire

Feet like burnished bronze

Jesus' Commendation (19)

Jesus' Condemnation (20-21)
Tolerant of "Jezebel"

Seduced by "Jezebel" to morally compromise

Jesus' Judgment (22-23)
Punishing "Jezebel"

Punishing "Jezebel's" disciples

Jesus' Admonition to Persevere (25)

Rewards for those who Persevere (26-28)
Authority to judge

"The Morning Star"

Ears to hear (29)