

“Thyatira: Zero Tolerance,” Revelation 2:18-29 (Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 28, 2017)

<sup>18</sup>“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.

<sup>19</sup>“ ‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> and I will strike her children dead. 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. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Only hold fast what you have until I come. <sup>26</sup> The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> And I will give him the morning star. <sup>29</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

## PRAY

We are working our way through Jesus’ letters to the seven churches of Asia (located in what we now call Turkey) in the book of Revelation, and today we come to his letter to the church at Thyatira. The Christians there were a lot like those in the previous three churches we’ve looked at: the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum. These churches were, on the whole, healthy churches, strong churches, with a lot of good things about them, and Thyatira is no different. “ ‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.’” Revelation 2:19. Jesus pays them a big compliment – the Christians in Thyatira are growing in their good works.

Yet even though there is so much that can be said positively about Thyatira and what the church there is doing, Jesus is not content with them. “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.” Revelation 2:20.

Jesus does not want the church in Thyatira to tolerate the teaching of Jezebel. Put another way, Jesus wants them to be intolerant of her teaching. And it’s here, of course, that so many in our society criticize Christians. If you are here today and you are not a Christian, welcome. We are so glad that you’re here. But if you are here this morning in an Oxford, Mississippi church service, and if you’re old enough to come here and understand a sermon yet you are self-consciously not a believer, then some part of you must view Christians as intolerant.

Because Christians are known as the intolerant people, aren’t we? We are known as the narrow-minded, those who can’t tolerate new ideas or new ways of thinking. We are frightened of and opposed to science, and we certainly are no fans of the arts – that’s too profane for Christians.

We'd rather ban a book than read it, boycott a movie than see it. We are dogmatic and we like to argue over meaningless bits of trivia like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. That's the reputation we have in society.

And if you're here this morning and you are a Christian, and I'm sure that's the majority of you, surely you also have encountered some professing Christians that even you thought were a little on the intolerant, bigoted side of things. When other Christians have raised a stink about some issue you've thought, "Why are they making such a big deal out of this? Is it really that important?" I've thought that before. You've maybe even been in some churches where the pastor had this particular hobby-horse he's ridden over and over again, just absolutely intolerant of some issue, and you've wondered, "Couldn't his time and his teaching and his energy be better devoted to other, more important, weightier issues?"

We've all had bad experiences with people practicing intolerance, but here we have Jesus himself saying to the church at Thyatira, "I have this against you: you tolerate Jezebel and her teaching." Jesus isn't intolerant of Jezebel because she's a bad teacher, because she's boring or unclear when she teaches. Jezebel was probably an outstanding teacher in that sense. He's intolerant of Jezebel because what she teaches is false.

So why is it that Christians need to be so intolerant of false teaching? Why do churches have to be so careful about what is taught in them? Three reasons: first, we need to be intolerant of false teaching out of reverence for God. Second, out of love for one another. Third, out of hope for what we all one day can be.

First, we must be intolerant out of reverence for God. Who was this Jezebel? We don't know much about this woman, not even her real name. "Jezebel" is a pseudonym. But we know a lot about the woman she's named after. The original biblical Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab of Israel. You can read about her beginning in 1 Kings 16. She was a determined Baal worshipper, one of the pagan gods of the time, and through her influence she led Israel into a prolonged period of idolatry. She's the one that henpecks her husband Ahab and she's the one that threatened to kill the prophet Elijah. She's one of the all-time bad people of the Bible. She's got such a horrible reputation that not one of you has been or ever will be tempted to name your daughter Jezebel. And even though we're in Mississippi, you won't even find a Mary Jezebel. She was a bad, bad woman.

But, much as with the name Balaam which we looked at last week, by the time of the New Testament the name "Jezebel" had taken on a symbolic meaning. The woman in Thyatira wasn't literally named Jezebel, but she was someone who was leading God's people astray by getting them to participate in idolatry.

Now, why? Remember, this Jezebel is a member of the church in Thyatira. She would have called herself a follower of Jesus. So why is she leading them into idolatry? Probably because she wanted to make life in the Roman Empire in the first century easier for her church.

Thyatira we know was an economically prosperous city – lots of trade, particularly in cloth. That may not sound like much today but it was very lucrative in the first century. In Acts 16, we

read that Paul's first convert in Greece was an Asian woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth (which was very expensive) from Thyatira. She was wealthy, owning a house in Philippi and her home back in Asia. And there were a lot of people like her in Thyatira.

But you could only deal in cloth, in purple dye, in clothing, if you were a part of one of the trade guilds in Thyatira (and we know from various inscriptions that have been uncovered that there were lots of those). And being a part of a trade guild meant that once a year you had to offer a sacrifice to the emperor at the Roman temple in the city; you had to worship Caesar as god.

So the Thyatira Jezebel probably got tired of seeing her fellow church members barely able to survive on what they could make, she got tired of seeing them locked out of economic prosperity, so she began to teach they had freedom in Christ to go to the temples and worship so they could be a part of these trade guilds. She wanted to make it easier on her friends in the church. But, in reality, she was leading them spiritual adultery – that's what the Bible calls it when you cheat on the one true God by worshipping at the temple of a false one.

I want you to know that as a pastor, as a Christian teacher, if you care about the people you teach at all, the temptation is not to make things harder on your people. If you care about them, you don't want to get up on a Sunday morning or lead a Bible study or teach a Sunday school class where you just yell at them and tell them how horrible they are. I know some pastors do that, but I think they are in the minority and they don't stick around in the ministry very long. If you're a parent and you're trying to teach your children the Bible, you don't want to do that either.

The temptation is not to make Christianity tougher on the people you're responsible for but easier. That's my temptation. I don't enjoy preaching on the hard passages of the Bible. I don't naturally enjoy preaching on judgment, on hell, on what the Bible says about sex and marriage, because I know how hard it is for a lot of us to hear. I know a lot of you start wondering about your friends and loved ones who don't believe in Jesus or what the Bible says about those things and you wonder what will happen to them, and it causes you pain. I don't enjoy that; I don't want to be the one who causes you pain.

Last week I sent out an email to the church and I included in it qualifications from 1 Timothy and Titus on elders. Later this year we'll elect some new elders at Grace Bible, and one of my responsibilities as a pastor is to keep this in front of people so they can pray about it and encourage men to come forward so they can be nominated. But I didn't enjoy doing it. I don't enjoy reminding women that they are ineligible to serve as elders, as I know some of you don't agree with that, and believe it or not I don't like arguing with people. And I know some of the men will look over this list of qualifications and say, "Well, I can't be an elder because of this or that," and you'll be discouraged. And I don't enjoy that part of my job. Mind you, I'm not apologizing for it. I'm not apologizing at all for what the Bible says. I'm just saying that my temptation, and the temptation of most of the people who try to teach the Bible at all to other people, is not to make it tougher but to soft-peddle the Scriptures. We don't enjoy causing people pain. I think that's what Jezebel was doing in Thyatira.

But look at Revelation 2:18: <sup>18</sup>“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.’”

And then, verses 26-27: “The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,<sup>27</sup> 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.”

Listen, if that’s who Jesus is – if he is the who has eyes like a flame of fire, and if he is the one who rules the nation with a rod of iron, an iron scepter – if Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, if he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, if he is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah and the Lamb who was slain, if he is very God of very God, then if he’s given us the Scriptures and said, “This is my Word – teach it to my people,” who are we to soft-peddle or hold back any of it for any reason whatsoever? That is the height of arrogance, for someone calling himself or herself a Christian to think he knows better than the Lord Jesus Christ what God’s people need to hear.

We may not enjoy delivering the message, but we cannot, we dare not, alter it in any way out of reverence for, honor of, devotion to, our God. Those of us who ever communicate to someone else what God has said (no matter the environment – whether it’s a sermon or a conversation over the water cooler at work or reading the Bible to your kids before you put them to bed), that person is, the Bible says, an ambassador. “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” 2 Corinthians 5:20.

You know what an ambassador does? No matter how unpalatable or painful an ambassador thinks the message from his government is, no matter how much he would like to modify the message to make it easier on those who would hear it, *he must deliver the message.*

Christians, we are ambassadors, and serve at the will and pleasure of the High King of Heaven. And we have one, primary responsibility: *be faithful to the message.* In the book of Jude 3, we read this: “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you *to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*”

Now, we must be sure that as ambassadors that we are actually contending for the faith once for all delivered and not what we *think* it is. If we are to be intolerant of false teaching we must work hard to contend only for true teaching, and not speak where the Bible has not. It’s not always easy to know where that line is. For a long time the church said the sun revolved around the earth and persecuted people who said that the earth revolved around the sun. The church obviously got that wrong. But we certainly can’t deliberately water-down or discard the message, because we are ambassadors who serve out of reverence for our king.

Second, we must be intolerant of false teaching out of love for one another in the church. Let’s read verses 21-23: “I gave her [meaning Jezebel] time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.<sup>22</sup> 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,<sup>23</sup> and I will strike her children dead. 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.”

There's a lot of debate over precisely what is meant here – what is the sickbed, what is the “great tribulation,” and who are her children who will be struck dead? But the overall message is crystal clear: if you succumb to false teaching, if you start following it, it will lead to sin, and sin always leads to destruction.

So, in Thyatira, you have Jezebel teaching some in the church there the false doctrine that it doesn't matter if you participate in idol worship – it's not that big of a deal, go ahead and do it anyway. Of course that's a sin, that's wrong. But what other sins might this false teaching have led to? If you start offering worship to the idols in the pagan temples, the sin won't stop there. We were designed by God for a relationship with him, and if we neglect that relationship by giving attention to other gods it will affect all of our lives.

So, for just a minute, put yourself in the shoes of those led astray by Jezebel. Imagine you're one of them. As you start going to the idol temples, even though you still call yourself a Christian, the power and the vibrancy of your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ will start to fade. He will become less and less real to you.

That means that you will feel less and less sure that he loves you and that he will provide for you. You were ok not worshipping at the idol temples even though it might cost you economically because you were so intimate with Jesus and you were sure he would take care of you and your family. But now, as you separate yourself from him with your sin, you aren't so sure anymore. Maybe he won't care for you. Now you think he's probably mad at you since you've gone to the idol temple. You feel guilty. That guilt leads to anxiety. And the anxiety leads to more sin – cutting corners at work because you've got to squeeze all the profit you can from it. You're angrier at home, because you are stressed out. Your relationships in your family and with your friends suffer. You start drinking more as a means of escape. You don't feel like eating right or exercising, so your health starts to suffer. Then you can't get up and work at the level you need to deal in the purple cloth, and you start falling behind the other merchants and now you're actually losing money. And down and down and down it goes. Does that sound familiar to anyone? False teaching leads to sin, and sin leads to destruction.

We were not designed to live in sin. We were designed to live in righteousness. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” You can live a long time like that. No one ever got sick or worn out or broke up a relationship because there was so much fruit of the Spirit was in their lives.

On the other hand, false teaching leads to the works of the flesh, and these will tear you apart. They will destroy you. Galatians 5:19-21: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Now, some of these are more accessible than others: we may not know much about sorcery or orgies, and the effect they have on us. But we all know what jealousy is like. It will eat you alive. When you're jealous, you're miserable. Why? You weren't designed for it.

And that's why Jesus is so intolerant of false teaching – he doesn't want you torn apart! And of course it's not just a this-life, this-earth, destruction that we face if we succumb to false teaching. "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.<sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.<sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell,<sup>48</sup> 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" Mark 9:43-48.

Jesus says that if you persist in sin long enough, it will harden your heart so that you reject anything that has to do with God and it will drag you down into eternal destruction – into hell. We saw that with the Old Testament Jezebel – her heart was so hardened by idolatry that even when Elijah on Mt. Carmel calls down fire from heaven to prove the God of Israel is the true God and Baal is false, she won't believe.

Friends, it's out of love for one another we cannot tolerate false teaching. Many of you have seen the magic/comedy duo Penn and Teller (they've been around more than thirty years now), and Penn Jillette – who is the big one, the one who speaks, Teller is the quiet one – for a long time was and probably still is an atheist. Years ago I watched one of Penn Jillette's video blogs, and in one entry he mentioned that after one of their Las Vegas shows a few nights earlier a man had come up to him. The man was a businessman, he struck up a brief conversation, and he was very complimentary of the show. At the end of the conversation he told Penn, "I want you to have something," and he gave Penn a pocket Gideon's Bible.

This really moved Penn Jillette. He kept saying, "This person who gave me the Bible was a good man." And then he said this: "I don't respect people who don't proselytize . . . If you believe there is a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life . . . and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would be socially awkward . . . How much do you have to hate someone to not proselytize them? How much to have to hate someone to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?" Now take that and just flip it around a bit. In the church, where we do believe in the God of the Bible and we do believe in a heaven and hell, how unloving would it be for us to tolerate false teaching that would distract from or confuse the message of salvation with have in the Lord Jesus Christ? "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24. Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, lived the life on earth you should have lived, and on the cross he paid the price you deserve to pay for your sins. And if you believe in him and give your life to him you are reconciled to God – you do get everlasting life. We are intolerant of false teaching because we want that message to be absolutely clear.

If you understand this, it will help you understand why we do so much of what we do at Grace Bible Church. It explains why we place so much emphasis on teaching the Bible (whether it's on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights or in small groups or training young men who might be pastors one day how to teach). We want to equip you with truth so you can know and reject false teaching when you hear it 24/7 in the world.

Over the years I've had a few people of other faiths or with different views ask me to use a Sunday morning to come up here and debate me or present their side of things to the church. And I've always told them, "No. This is not a debate society – this is a church. We all already agree on these things. If you want to debate some other time or place, name it and I'll be there. But my job on Sundays is to feed the sheep, not muddy the water for the sheep."

Likewise we don't have a lot of guest speakers at Grace Bible Church, because in the past I've invited people into my churches and they've really handled the Word of God badly. No one gave us straight false teaching, but they've given confusing teaching. So I'm gunshy – if I'm not preaching I want Jim or someone else we've trained up in this church. We love you, so we want to keep truth in front of you and false teaching as far away as we can.

Third, we are intolerant of false teaching out of hope for what one day you all can be. What does that mean? Read Revelation 2:28: Jesus says of the one who conquers and who keeps his works until the end, "I will give him the morning star." Like a lot of things in this letter to the church at Thyatira there's debate among the scholars as to what Jesus really means, but I think this one is pretty clear: Jesus is saying that if you overcome you will one day be glorified. You'll have a glory about you, like the stars in the sky. We know that John, the author of Revelation, relies a lot on the book of Daniel for his inspiration and imagery, and in Daniel 12:3 we read this: "And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

A few years ago someone very close to me, someone who is not a Christian, had a stranger share the gospel with him in an airport. Within a few minutes this person asked my friend, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" My friend does not, and he made it clear to that person he did not, and when he told me the story later he mocked the man for how he shared the gospel with him.

I admire anyone who wants to tell other people the good news of Jesus, though we can debate the best way to approach total strangers with it. But what was clear to me was that my friend really had no clue what was being offered him in the gospel of Jesus Christ – he really didn't get how it was that Jesus would save him.

When he heard, "Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" what he heard was, "You need to go ahead and admit you were wrong about Jesus. All your life, wrong. Then you need to sit on a pew every Sunday and listen to music you don't like and a boring sermon you won't understand. You'll have to stop doing some of the things you really enjoy, and you'll have to start being narrow-minded and judgmental. It won't really change you in any meaningful, good way. But at least then you'll be on the winning team, the Christian team. And you won't go to hell when you die, even though you don't really believe it exists right now anyway." That's pretty much what he heard, and I think we've all known Christians who can make salvation sound that way, and maybe some of you also once thought of it that way.

But that is not what the Bible means by salvation! Salvation means that one day you will, literally, shine like the stars in the universe. You'll be glorified. Jesus in talking to the Pharisees

and some of their followers, says to them in John 10:34: "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'?" He calls them all gods!

About that verse C.S. Lewis at one point says this: "[Jesus] said that we were "gods" and he is going to make good His words. If we let Him - for we can prevent Him, if we choose - He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said."

Take every superhero movie out there, and the various powers ascribed to the characters, and it's not too far off to say that will be you in the new heavens and the new earth if you overcome and keep Christ's works through the power of the gospel.

That's biblical, New Testament salvation; not a decision you made some years ago, not joining a church, not adopting a new code of ethics, but what Jesus will by his power do in and through you in the future. That's what we are waiting for and, friends, false teaching will only lead you away from that. So often false teaching sounds so open-minded and fair at first, but it only leads further into sin and away from God and the salvation he has for you. So we can't tolerate it in the church. In the church, we want to pump you full of true, good, biblical, godly teaching, until one day you can sing with Jesus "ours the cross, the grave, the skies." AMEN.