

When Tolerance is Intolerable, and Forgiveness is Unforgiveable Revelation 2:18-29

Tolerance (of almost everything except intolerance) is a cardinal virtue in postmodern America. For the most part, Christians can applaud this. Tolerance is an essential value for a pluralistic culture: it keeps us from attacking each other, and creates free space for individuality to flourish. Moreover, compared to the religious leaders of his day, Jesus was remarkably tolerant (though ‘tolerance’ is less the word than ‘forgiving’).

Still, all would agree that some things rightly remain beyond tolerance or forgiveness. Where the difference comes is in the items on that list, and the basis for inclusion. From the perspective of American culture, most sexual activities have fallen off the list, while other bodily-related functions (such as smoking, overeating, and various bodily odors) have risen to the top. However that plays out from one culture to the next, or from one era to the next, the point is that all cultures have items on the list of intolerable, unforgiveable sins, though they may not have consistent, logical criteria for selecting the particular items which belong there.

In Revelation 2:18-29, John – and Jesus – clearly have such a list in view, though it differs at important points from the list advocated by some in the church at Thyatira. This is the central issue of the passage: Should particular items be on the list? Who decides? and, What happens when our lists differ from the culture’s, from each other’s, or from God’s?

Day 1: Revelation 2:18 The real Son of God

First-century practice deified Roman emperors once they died. A successor would then claim the title, ‘son of God’. By use of this designation, Jesus asserts his true divinity over Roman imperial pretense. The descriptions ‘eyes like blazing fire’ and ‘feet like burnished bronze’ (along with the various descriptions in the other letters) recalls the plethora of titles collated in Revelation 1:12-18. These particular phrases derive from Daniel 10, where the prophet receives a visitation from an angel whose “eyes were like flaming torches [and whose] arms and legs [were] like the gleam of burnished bronze” (Dan 10:6). So, all three descriptions underscore the supernatural character and authority of this vision and of Christ. Jesus is a heavenly being, the true son of God. It is he, not Roman emperor nor Roman culture, whose decrees are authoritative.

We no longer have emperors, but apart from that detail, our context is much the same. We still have rulers who pass laws, and a culture which establishes norms, and anyone who violates those laws or norms suffers

the consequences. So Jesus' word to us is the same as his word to the church of Thyatira: he is the true divine Son of God, so it is his norms which establish propriety, and differentiate right from wrong. We rightly listen to him, not to our culture or its leaders. We rightly allow him, not our culture, to establish our standards of morality and propriety.

Day 2: Revelation 2:19 What the church of Thyatira does right

Jesus finds much for which to commend this church. In general, their deeds are positive. In particular, he praises their love and their faithfulness, their service and their perseverance in the face of persecution. Overall, they are doing better now, than when they first came to faith.

Each of us could do well to ask this question of ourselves: How am I doing? Am I growing, or losing ground, in love for God and for others in the church? In commitment to Christ? In ministry and service? Do I profess Christ before a watching world, and a sometimes antagonistic culture, or do I try and fly beneath the radar to avoid mockery or criticism? Am I more of each – or less of each – compared to when I first came to faith? What is one specific area where my progress is reassuring? One specific area where I can improve?

Day 3: Revelation 2:20 That woman Jezebel

The original Jezebel was the notorious foreign-born queen of Israel, wife of King Ahab who, at her urging, "did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him" (1 Kings 16:33). Among their sins: they worshipped other gods, opposed the prophets of God, and oppressed the poor (1 Kings 19-21).

This characterization of a member of the church in Thyatira makes one positive and one negative point. Positively, the label works only because this church member is both (a) female, and (b) a leader. While several New Testament texts indicate that top leadership was mostly male, this passage one of several that accord women a leadership role, prophet.

Negatively, this title implies that the woman advocates sexual immorality and eating idol food. How could this be true of a Christian leader? In Thyatira, issues of idol food and sexual immorality would arise in the normal course of Christian engagement with a multi-religious culture. Whether through family, neighbors, professional associates, or political rallies, Christians would receive invitations to join meals with adherents of other faiths. Joining such meals would typically involve sharing food that had been offered to idols, sometimes followed by lewd entertainment. Declining such invitations would lead to social ostracism and worse.

At the very least – and quite possibly no more – the Jezebel figure was advocating going along to get along, not endorsing actual belief in other gods, or participation in their rituals or in orgies, but simply advocating joining what could arguably be construed as predominately social events. Of course, John claims that Jesus sees it differently. Along with the apostle Paul, he affirms that even joining a meal where idol food is served is to participate in worship of that god. This segues into the Jezebel's second sin: just as her namesake opposed the prophets of God, when the apostle John rules otherwise, she stubbornly persists in her view, and opposes him.

While few of us have occasion to join a meal where idol food is served, some of us might be inclined to go to a party or club where people are on the lookout for casual sexual partners. If neither of these two temptations beckon, this text also speaks to other occasions when we might 'go along to get along', compromising faith with culture, so as not to face ostracism. Or, as with this woman in Thyatira, we might oppose church or spiritual leadership when it advocates abstinence from dubious activities. In short, John warns against participating in ambiguous or compromising cultural activities, even at the cost of social ostracism.

Day 4: Revelation 2:20-21 When tolerance is intolerable, and forgiveness, unforgiveable. Despite all their commendable attributes, and their progress over the span of their Christian lives, the church in Thyatira is at fault at one point: they are too tolerant. They should have silenced this miscreant, or disciplined her. The Greek here is particularly instructive: the word is more commonly translated 'forgive'. This church forgives someone who is beyond forgiveness. In short, it is possible for a church to be too tolerant, too forgiving, and this church is guilty.

What puts this woman outside the boundaries of forgiveness? For one thing, her teaching is seriously in error: God previously killed his people when they ate idol food or engaged in sexual immorality; for her to condone these sins contradicts the Word of God. For another, she has refused correction, even though she was given time to consider her error. Indeed, she is likely claiming special insight into the 'deep things of God' (which accounts for John's sarcastic 'deep things of Satan').

So this text provides several important lessons. Among them: We must not merely accept teaching unexamined, even from a prominent preacher or famous theologian, but must assess it by Scripture. We must not forgive and tolerate everyone at every time; some sins and errors deserve rebuke, and persistence in them warrants discipline.

Day 5: Revelation 2:22-23 The penalty for sin is suffering

These two verses are extraordinarily strong. Recalling the penalties inflicted on Israel for idol worship and sexual immorality in the wilderness, Jesus threatens three punishments: (a) he will make the prophetess suffer, (b) he will cause her followers to suffer intensely, (c) he will strike her children dead (likely signifying metaphorical children, i.e., her followers). The irony is intense: she is advocating participation in these cultural rites precisely to avoid persecution; as a result, instead of suffering at the hands of Roman bureaucrats, she will suffer at the hands of Jesus.

Such talk from Jesus seems jarring, but this passage is no isolated incident within the New Testament. We have transmogrified Jesus into 'meek and mild', when he is equally – in the words of a recent book title – 'mean and wild'. Of course, he is alternately either, depending on what circumstances warrant. But he is only 'mean and wild' as a last resort: each warning comes equipped with an escape clause, 'unless she/they repent' (2:21,22). We do well not to fear Jesus if we are not living as this Jezebel; but if we are, we do well to fear him, and even better, to stop.

Day 6: Revelation 2:25-28 The reward for holiness is glory

Here John quotes from Psalm 2:8-9. Strikingly, various New Testament authors read Psalm 2:7 as messianic: "You are my son; today I have become your father" (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 11:35; Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5; cf. Ps 2:1-2; Acts 4:25-26). Psalm 2 continues the promises to the Messiah, "I will make the nations your inheritance ... You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery" (Ps 2:8-9). The apostle John takes these latter verses and applies their promise also to believers (Rev 2:25-28). His point: those who persist in faith in the face of persecution will one day share in Jesus' rule over the whole world.

So the penalty of failure is great: those who persist in sin will suffer destruction. But the reward for success is also great: those who persevere will share in Christ's reign over the whole earth. This paragraph begins with Jesus, true emperor of heaven and earth; it ends with us as co-regents, reigning with him.