True Tolerance: Thyatira

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[0:00] That would be helpful if you opened your Bibles and turned right to the back to Revelation chapter 2 on page 228. Probably feels a little bit odd this morning to spend some time looking at a letter that was written at the end of the first century to a very small church in a town in Asia Minor called Thyatira.

I'm going to try and get through the sermon without mispronouncing that, Thyatira. And I think it's tempting to read these letters simply as archaeological showpieces with very little relevance to us today.
Except of course for the fact that they are written by the living, risen and ruling Lord Jesus Christ. And at the end of each he says this, listen to what the Spirit is saying now to the churches, plural. And I think that goes some way to explaining why every church in every generation receives this as the word of God. Before we visit little Thyatira, I want to say two things.
Two things have stood out as we've looked through these letters to the seven churches. And the first is this, each church is deeply engaged in the life of the city, the community and the culture in which they find themselves.
[1:19] Every one of these letters demonstrates that the Christian life is not lived just between God and me, nor just between God and me and the church. But between God, me, the church and the community where God has placed us.

In every letter, Jesus is intensely concerned with the relationship between the Christian community and the culture, the society surrounding them. In fact, the two letters which receive the strongest rebukes from Jesus are those churches which are being tempted to withdraw from contact with the world and to retreat from engaging in society.
You remember back at the beginning of chapter 2, the letter to Ephesus. Yes, here is a church that's standing firm for the truth, they're thoroughly orthodox. But they have failed to love those around them.
And Jesus says to them, unless you turn away from that lovelessness and begin engaging in the kind of love that I have demonstrated, I will come and I will remove the lampstand and you will be a church no more.
And perhaps even more telling is the church of Laodicea in chapter 3. Here is a church that is neither hot nor cold, very full of themselves. They have some sort of faith, but it has not changed them.
[2:37] It has not led to them caring. And Jesus says, I cannot stomach a church that does not care. So, as we come to Thyatira, one of the marks of authentic Christian faith is taking the word of God with deep seriousness and taking our city, culture and society with deep seriousness as well.

And the second thing that strikes me is this, that in every church, appearances are deceiving. What the church looks like on the outside and what the church really is through the eyes of Jesus are two entirely different things.
For example, Smyrna, chapter 2.9, they look like they're poor and persecuted. But Jesus says, in fact, you are incalculably wealthy. Whereas Laodicea in 3.17 think that they are rich and need nothing.
But Jesus says, you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, naked. Sardis has the name of being alive. It's a vital active church with people and programs bouncing.
Jesus says, you're dead. And that is why you cannot analyse the church through the lens of sociology or psychology or statistics or demography. I mean, those disciplines may give you some facts, but they won't take you to the heart, to what Jesus sees.

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[4:00] Because each church is a lamp burning. Each church is where the person of Jesus Christ is present. A community of light centred on him.

A place where we meet with Christ. So long as we reflect him and remain faithful to him. So in verse 18 we read this. 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.
You see, he sees past the externals. He sees past the reputation. It doesn't matter if you've got a good reputation or a bad reputation as a church. It's easy, you see, to deceive ourselves.
It's less easy to deceive those around us. And it's impossible to deceive him. And each letter he says, I know. I know what's happening for you. I look past the appearances.
He walks amongst the lampstands. He's with us. He knows what we are struggling with. He knows and he walks with us along that way. And I think they are words of great comfort as well as being uncomfortable.
[5:14] Now you see this appearance as being deceptive in this letter to Thyatira. This is the longest of the seven letters. And Thyatira is the smallest of the seven towns.

It's a little valley between two other valleys. And although it's not a huge city, it has more trade guilds than any other Asian city.
Consequently, it is more multicultural than any other Asian city. It's quite possible that Christianity came to Thyatira through a young woman, businesswoman, named Lydia, who, when she was in Philippi, heard a preacher called Paul of Tarsus.
And God opened her heart to believe. However the gospel came to Thyatira, it had found deep root and was now bearing fruit. You see verse 19, I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and your latter works exceed the first.
This is a great church to belong to. It's marked by faith, hope and love. They haven't stopped. They are moving in the right direction. There's nothing static and stagnant about the life.
[6:27] This is very important, of course. Ephesus is sliding back. Thyatira is moving forward, which of course causes us to ask which direction we're heading in.

I think it is probably true that a church can never stand still. We're either moving in growth or moving backwards. Are we moving ahead in our faith? Are we deepening in hope?
Do we actually love one another? But not everything is well in this loving church of Thyatira. Verse 20. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.
Now, Jezebel is not a really popular name these days, is it?
When we have children to be baptised, I don't think we've had a Jezebel yet. I did have a car called Jezebel once. Let me get back to the text.
[7:39] It's not at all simple to be a Christian in Thyatira. This is a city where the life of the city centres on the trade guilds. And unless you belong to one, it was next to impossible to feed your family.

And each trade guild had a guardian god or goddess. And there were regular festivals. And we know that the festivals followed pretty much the same pattern.
If you were anyone important in the city, you had to be at the festival or your face wouldn't be in the fire Tyre's sun the next day. And this is what happened at the festivals. Food would be offered to the idols, the gods, and then everyone would eat the food.
And when the feast was ended, the romp would begin and you had the chance to have sex with as many people as you possibly could. And to walk away from something like that would make you a very easy target.
Now what do you do if you are a Christian living in Thyatira? If you walk out of the feast, or worse, if you don't attend, your place in the guild is very much at risk.
[8:51] And you place your family in genuine danger, not just of persecution but of starvation. You become unemployable. It doesn't matter if you're a woman or a man. But if you stay and participate in the feast and take part in the orgy, you deny your Lord.

And I think we need to be careful how we read Jezebel here. I think it's easy for us to look down our historical noses at her and say how could they possibly be fooled by this kind of teaching.
But it's crucial for us to see she was not a pagan. She was a Christian teacher, a prophetess, one whom God was seeking to bring to repentance.

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She was not trying to destroy the Christian faith. She was trying to find a way to be Christian and a full member of Thyatiran society at the same time.
There's absolutely no indication from this letter that Jezebel or any of her followers were anything but sincere. She's trying to find a way that they can maintain the Christian profession as well as be immersed in the culture surrounding them, which is something very important for us to do.
[10:02] And from what we can gather from this passage and reconstruct, it seems that Jezebel was teaching a solution, a way through the difficulty, where you could hold on to your Christian faith as well as eat the food to idols, as well as take part in the sexual immorality.

And I think verse 24 is the clue. She taught that what Christians ought to do is to learn the deep things of Satan. Commentators pretty much agree this is a Corinthian-type issue.
Jezebel said, in order to conquer Satan, you need to learn the deep things of Satan. You'll never defeat sin unless you become thoroughly acquainted with sin by experience.
And my guess is, the way that you learn the deep things of Satan is by attending the feast and eating the food and taking what sex is offered. She may have said, the gods, they're just idols. They're not really gods.
You can enter any sexual experience you like and it won't really affect you as a Christian. You can be fully participating members of the guild just like your neighbours, still remain a Christian.
[11:06] In fact, you'll be a better Christian. You'll have a deeper faith in Jesus because you have a deeper knowledge of the things of Satan. And we must not minimise or trivialise the importance of this question for the fire tyrants.

I mean, there's no academic issue here. People within the same family, some look to Jezebel and say, this is a way for us. Others say, this is disobedience.
See, in every generation, the question that faces us as Christians is how do we integrate our faith into the reality of our daily lives?
As we immerse ourselves in the culture which God has placed us in, how far do we adopt and accept the standards of our community? What does it look like to be faithful in today's world?
This is the world that Jesus died for. He has left us here for a purpose, to be different from the world, to be sure, but to be engaged with the world, to be a light, a lamp, if you will, shining the love and the truth of God into the reality of what is happening around us.
[12:12] And I think as Canadian Christians, we face a bewildering array of difficult issues within our culture, within our city. You know, healthcare reform and education issues and government and drugs and, I mean, you take just one of those, take the healthcare issues, stem cell research, prenatal screening, human cloning, euthanasia.

But I think perhaps the most widespread and pervasive issue we face is this. How do we live with our cultural, ethnic and religious differences?
How do we as a Canadian society live with those differences? A multiculturalism is a reality that we are all immersed in, a wonderful, a brilliant reality that we are all immersed in.
This week we had some friends over for dinner and around the dinner table we represented every continent on the globe except one and there were only eight people at the dinner table.
But you see, the fact of multiculturalism is very different from the virtues which undergird it. And the answer that our culture has come to in response to this, the reality of multiculturalism is to embrace tolerance as a virtue in its own right.
[13:42] It's to elevate tolerance. And now this is completely understandable. Historically, Western culture has not been known for its kindness and inclusivity. Groups of people in our history have been systematically excluded, ignored, ignored and oppressed for no other reason than because of who they are.

And we need to acknowledge the real injustice in our history. And as a reaction we have swung with the pendulum to the total opposite. Now, inclusiveness, diversity and tolerance rule as unassailable and untouchable virtues.
The very idea that you can distinguish something as good or bad or right or wrong is odious. There is no truth today, just a whole range of equally valid perspectives.
And I think this is the heart of the mood in Canadian culture. All values, all ideas, all beliefs, all truths are equally valid, are equally legitimate.
And any attempt to arbitrate is offensive. Some of the books that I read coming out of the evangelical presses now say this. All that we can do as Christians is affirm this smorgasbord of

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truths and I think the reason is because people hope that there will be room at the table for us and for our truth.
[15:10] And it has had a profound effect on public discourse. You very rarely hear the language of right or wrong, do you? I mean, it has been replaced today with the word inappropriate.

And it's inappropriate today to seek to change someone's mind or to say that they are wrong. It's inappropriate to say someone is bad. There are no bad people, only good people who make mistakes. So we have developed this wonderful skill of becoming indirect because we sense that whatever we do we must not hurt the feelings of others because it is our God-given right not to be offended.
And I think it makes it very difficult for people of gospel conviction. I think we have become slaves of trying to show not that the gospel is true but that the gospel is attractive.
And we're petrified to express our faith convictions because when tolerance becomes the cultural deity someone who asserts truth becomes very close to blasphemy and the true cultural heretic is the evangelist.
I think we can see this in ourselves. I see it in myself. We react more to a speaker's style than to their content. We want to be nice. We really want to be nice. But more and more we are aware that our basic beliefs are an offense to the deepest values of our culture.
[16:33] culturally the way that we have come to live with our differences is to elevate one truth above every other truth and made that truth unquestionable and it is that truth that all truth is equal.

I had a wonderful illustration of this last Sunday. None of you saw this because you were in church but I had the privilege of watching the federal government host the Thanksgiving Day service for Her Majesty the Queen on Parliament Hill.
I didn't see it all but when I turned on the television there was a group of Sikh children singing and as soon as they finished it was followed by a Muslim imam reading a prayer to Allah.
Then a rabbi read a prayer. Then a Ukrainian Orthodox choir sang. Then the stage was immediately filled with Irish dancing. Then an African drum group began dancing on the stage. Then they danced together and as soon as they finished the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Ottawa prayed a prayer and then we went straight into a sung chant by a Hindu priest.
[17:39] Then we heard a song in praise of Mother Earth. Then the Mohawk Nation sang a song. Then the choir sang a peon of praise just praise as film footage of the beauty of Canada rolled behind them on a screen on the stage.

Then we heard a few verses of Amazing Grace by a brilliant black singer with film footage of children behind her. Then when she'd finished one verse a black choir joined her on stage and we had some more verses of Amazing Grace with film footage of very happy people doing very happy things behind.
Then the choir on stage and the black choir and she sang the first verse of Amazing Grace all in unison together. and we had film footage of Earth from space on the screen behind.
Then Prince Philip stood and read some verses from Proverbs 8 about the way of wisdom being the way of prosperity and peace. Actually it's about Jesus Christ. Then a Jewish cantor stood and sang John Lennon's song Imagine in Hebrew.
This is a song that hopes for the eradication of all religion and any idea of heaven. Then a Palestinian woman sang Imagine in Arabic and then the choir finished with a resounding Imagine in English and Peter Mansbridge was almost speechless.
[19:09] And I don't know what Her Majesty thought of it. But it perfectly illustrates what I'm saying. No one blinked an eye that you could sing two things side by side that are utterly contradictory.

The idea Amazing Grace founded on the hope of heaven the song Imagine founded on the hope there is no heaven. Now don't get me wrong I think there is so much about inclusivity and tolerance and diversity that we as Christians need to affirm.
In fact we need to be on the front lines affirming. But if we follow Jesus Christ we will part company with those virtues somewhere.
Because tolerance by itself means absolutely nothing unless we have some agreement about what is right and what is wrong. If all ideas are equally valid then no idea is right and no idea is wrong and you and I have no right to judge the Washington sniper or the barley bomber or priests who sexually abuse children and on and on and on.

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Jesus does not value tolerance for its own sake. He values tolerance because of his deeper commitment to love and truth. Do you remember when he meets the woman of Samaria? [20:34] He crosses every boundary to embrace her with his love. He will not let any prejudice any discrimination stop his love. But when he embraces her he does not let her pretend for a moment that all truth is equal or that her truth is as valid as his.

He tells her the truth. She has had five husbands and is now living in adultery. It is the embrace of his love together with the revelation of his truth that brings her to salvation.
And the love of Jesus is wide enough to embrace every person in its grasp but he does not embrace every idea and he does not embrace every behaviour.
So it is for us who follow Jesus. We value love and we value truth and tolerance is just one way to love others so long as it is guided by the truth of God.
As Christians we oppose discrimination, we oppose prejudice, not because they're offensive, although they are, not because they cause emotional distress, although they do.
[21:50] We oppose them because they are wrong, according to God. And if we follow Jesus Christ, sometimes we will seem way over intolerant and sometimes we will seem way over tolerant.

Tolerance is not our virtue though. Tolerance is not love. Without God's truth to guide, tolerance just becomes a way of me not caring.
But Christ's love compels us to care. And I think in the end it's not tolerance but love which best honours the dignity and the worth of the other person.
The reason I'm saying this is you see this pattern in our passage. It's very interesting. Despite the fact that Jezebel is leading people astray and teaching people into idolatry and immorality, Jesus still desires to embrace Jezebel with his love.
You see verse 21? I gave her time to repent but she refuses to repent. She will not repent. They're words of tenderness and anguish. Jesus doesn't need to offer Jezebel repentance.
[23:00] She doesn't deserve to have repentance and yet he is reaching out and offering to embrace her with his love. He will not embrace her false ideas. He will not embrace her false behaviour.

It's the same Jesus who weeps over Jerusalem. You remember, Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.
But you would not. It's the same Jesus who wants all to come to repentance and none to perish.
And the judgments that are spelled out in verse 22 are the result of Jezebel rejecting the love of Jesus and holding fast her false beliefs and false behaviour because Jesus does not force us to love him.
And if we choose to push him away, he takes a backward step and allows us to practice what we choose. But if we allow him to embrace us with his love, his love is a transforming love and it doesn't, while it takes us where we are, it doesn't leave us where we are.
He draws us into repentance where we turn away from everything that he says is wrong. But if we hold on to those things, we turn away from his love. And what distresses Jesus about Jezebel is not just that she won't repent, nor that her followers won't repent, but it is that the church at Thyatira are tolerating her, which shows they are not demonstrating love and truth.
[24:42] But Jesus' explicit promise is to take the church at Thyatira into a place where she will again shine with his truth and love. Let's look at the last verses. In 26, Jesus says, He who conquers and he who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule over them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from the Father, and I will give him the morning star.

We don't have time to go into this. I think the authority over nations is an image of the gospel going out into all the world. It's the authority of the resurrected Christ to preach the gospel, to bring people into the love and the truth of Jesus Christ.
It's about the church making disciples, being a lampstand for his truth and his love. And how does Thyatira move from where they are to here?
How does any church move? Let me finish with two things. Jesus calls on us for two things, and the first has to do with truth in verse 25. He says, Only hold fast what you have until I come.
what you have is one single thing. It is the, it's Christian truth. It's the sum total of Bible teaching, the basic essence of the Christian faith.

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[26:05] Jesus calls on us to take a firm grip on the truth that he has revealed. It's very important, friends, that we don't think of the Christian revelation as one truth among many truths.

It is the truth amongst great error. And this is Jesus' call for us to live our lives and to make our decisions based on the word of God. To make reading his word and understanding his word a growing habit.
Truth, and the second has to do with love. I take this from the first phrase in verse 26. He who conquers and he who keeps my works, my works until the end.
I think our temptation is to think passively about love. Now we think we are loving when we don't offend people or we are loving if we have positive thoughts towards them.
But Jesus' love always shows itself in action, always in works. And he is not just concerned that we hold fast to the truth, he is concerned about the way we hold it.
[27:12] Whether we keep his works to the end, whether we reflect his care and his love. I wonder what Jesus would say to us this morning. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Amen. our Lord Christ, we thank you that you have reached out and given your very life to embrace us with your love and to reveal your truth to us, the truth.
And we thank you for the gift of repentance and we pray that you would deepen your faith and the hope of heaven and the love that you demonstrated in each of us.
We pray this not for our own sake so much as for the sake of those who do not know you and for your own glory. Amen.

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