

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, November 26, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

REVELATION 2:20

“But I have this against you, that
you tolerate the woman Jezebel.

THE INTOLERANCE OF CHRISTIANITY

Thomas Carlyle once wrote an essay on the subject of “clothing” that should gladden the heart of any retailer of men’s or ladies’ wear. He said, in effect, that you can take the most uncouth character, dress him up in fine apparel, and make him look for all the world like a gentleman!

Sometimes we do the same thing with language. We take a word, respectable enough in its original meaning, and dress it up in fine clothes, so that it assumes an appearance much grander than it really merits. We use this word to describe moral virtues which in the first instance it was not coined to describe.

Look, for example, at the word “tolerance.” Tolerance has come to be regarded as one of the cardinal virtues in modern society, a catchword like “democracy” or “freedom.” We use it to describe what we consider to be the ideal relationship between people, especially people who differ from one another in race, color, creed or social status. Yet we have only to consult the dictionary in order to see that, when stripped naked, the word “tolerance” has no such ideal meaning. It means very simply “to allow the existence of,” or “to endure the society of.”

Now if that is the meaning of “tolerance,” strictly defined, it is not a commendable virtue, and it certainly does not describe an ideal relationship among people. It comes nowhere near the teachings of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, where we are commanded not simply to tolerate other people, but to love them; and that goes far beyond the passive admission that they have a right to elbow room.

The word “tolerance” occurs only once in the Bible, and there it is vehemently denounced. You find it in Revelation 2:20 where Christ, after commending the Church at Thyatira for certain virtues, says, “But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel...” The Christians at Thyatira faced a grave dilemma. Most of them worked in the purple dye industry, and their industrial life was dominated by trade guilds, the counterpart of our modern labor unions. You had to belong to a guild, or else no one would employ you. But the trouble was that these guilds sponsored parties and other social events which included customs that no true Christian could subscribe to. Invariably they spread the banquet tables with food which had first been offered to pagan idols, and sometimes these parties would end up in drunken brawls and sex orgies. It was very difficult for a Christian to be a member of the guild and exclude himself from its social life, so what was he supposed to do?

In the Church at Thyatira there was a woman of considerable influence who claimed to be a prophetess. The writer of Revelation calls her “Jezebel,” naming her after the original Jezebel, the foreign wife of King Ahab of Israel, who, though she did not turn her husband away from the Lord God Jehovah, nevertheless persuaded him to tolerate her pagan gods, and as a result, opened the door to the darkest crimes committed in Israel’s history. This second Jezebel did exactly the same thing. Taking advantage of her wealth and influence, she tried to persuade the Christians in Thyatira to be sensible, and accommodate themselves to the pagan customs, however revolting they seemed. Because of her wealth and influence some of the Christians, at least, paid attention to her. One can imagine her saying something like this: “Now see here, these customs have been going on for a long time, and you are not going to help the Christian cause by standing out against them. Eat the food offered to idols; enjoy the fun and the frolic. You can do these things and still be Christians. On the other hand, if they bother your conscience, at least keep quiet about it, and don’t embarrass the rest of us.”

To this situation the inspired writer of Revelation addressed his letter. Apparently, the Christians had not gone so far as to imitate Jezebel in her wickedness, but the writer, speaking in the Name of Christ, says to them: “I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel. You allow her to remain in the church. Her pernicious teaching does not seem to disturb your conscience. You do not agree with her, but you take what you consider the tolerant attitude that she has a perfect right to her point of view, even though you know that her point of view is contrary to God’s will.” There is no doubt what Christ expected the Christians at Thyatira to do. This woman was evil. Her influence on the Church imperiled its future; and if she succeeded in getting her way, Christianity in that city would eventually be doomed in a sea of paganism. Therefore, there could be no tolerance, no compromise. Jezebel must repent, or she must be excommunicated from the body of believers. We all know what one rotten apple can do in a barrel of apples. Their action might mean economic suicide for the Christians, and even a few martyrdoms perhaps, but the alternatives were clear. It had to be one or the other; to tolerate Jezebel would be nothing less than a repudiation of Christ.

Does that give you a new insight into the meaning of this dressed-up word “tolerance”? Does it suggest an attitude which is not uncommon today, a broad-mindedness which says, “Yes, we are Christians; we believe certain things and we go to church, but let’s not be boorish or narrow-minded about it. Let us not expect other people to think and act the way we do. Let’s be tolerant toward all that they stand for.” What we have supposed to be tolerance, however, may in fact be cowardly indifference and a shocking betrayal of Christ. If we look more closely at the New Testament, and at the history of our faith, we might be astonished to discover that, in terms of our definitions, true Christianity is a very intolerant religion — not, of course, in the sense of Islamic fundamentalism with its vengeful spirit and its policy of terrorism which leads to the most barbaric atrocities.

But the point is this: if Christianity had not been intolerant, we would not be here this morning. Only because the Church at Thyatira excommunicated Jezebel from its membership, only because the Church throughout the Mediterranean world was obstinately intolerant, did our faith survive through the first three centuries. Christians utterly refused to go along with pagan customs and attitudes which were hostile to the cause of Christ. That was why the Roman authorities persecuted the Christians, fed them to the lions, impaled them on crosses, and drove

them underground into the catacombs.

The Roman world was broad-minded enough. It did not object to Jesus of Nazareth. It had open arms for Jesus as well as for any other “god.” But the early Christians “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) by affirming that Jesus was Lord — not just the Lord of one little sect, but the Lord of all worlds, all times and all souls. They utterly refused, as was required of all people within the Roman Empire, to burn a pinch of incense, once a year, before the shrine of the Emperor. It might seem harmless enough to go through the ritual of acknowledging Caesar to be divine. It proved their loyalty to the Empire. They could then go back and worship and serve their Jesus for the rest of the year. But the Christians would not tolerate such idolatry. Jesus alone was Lord, and they were utterly uncompromising in their loyalty to Him; and that was why multitudes of them were martyred -- because of their intolerance.

Who was ever more intolerant than Jesus? Though He showed the compassion and love of God even toward the weakest and most sinful of men, He nevertheless would not countenance any evil that affronted God’s holiness; and because of His intolerance, evil men murdered Him on a cross. He communicated that same spirit of intolerance to His disciples. When the Jewish religious authorities ordered them to stop preaching, on penalty of death, they retorted, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard!” (Acts 4:20); “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). When Peter healed a lame man in the Name of Christ, he declared boldly, “There is no other Name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

From the very beginning the whole structure of our faith has rested on a simple creed, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Christians have believed that when God revealed Himself in Christ, He revealed Himself to the whole world. They have believed that when Christ died upon the Cross, He died that all people, everywhere, through faith in Him, might be saved. They have believed that by raising Christ from the dead, God has proclaimed His sovereignty over all areas of human life. And they have believed that as servants of Christ we have a divine commission to be intolerant until all areas of human life are brought under Christ’s Lordship.

This belief has always been, and still remains, the dynamic for Christian missions. In that belief, the Church sends out missionaries, and in that belief, we appeal for money to support their work. Truthfully it may be said that missions are the product of Christian intolerance. They may even be called a form of Christian imperialism because the missionary, whatever his form of service, aims to bring individuals to know and serve Christ, just as the Communist aims to convert individuals to Communism. But some people, even within our churches today, have an uneasy conscience about missions. They wonder if we have a right to impose our faith on the adherents of other religions. Would it not be more Christian, they ask, to tolerate other religions, find out what we have in common with them, and work with them in the struggle against materialism?

But such an attitude is utterly and forever un-Christian because it forgets one vital fact. Christianity recognizes that there are some fine things in other religions. We do not say that other world religions contain in them nothing of value. What we do say is that they are not God’s last and finest word to the world; and they are not His saving word to lost sinners. Christianity is not

one religion among others. It is in a category by itself; it is quite unique, unsurpassed, unparalleled, simply because the Lord we worship is God incarnate Who, two thousand years ago, came to earth to atone for our sin, to conquer death, to break down every barrier of race, class and color. Believing what we do about Him and realizing that “there is no other Name whereby we must be saved,” we cannot concede, even by implication, that there are any “gods” or “prophets” equal to Him. He is utterly unique in His Person, in His Mission, and in His finished work upon the Cross for the eternal salvation of every individual on this planet who will receive Him by faith. In Him is “life” which is life indeed. Without Him there is only darkness and death. He is the only true Savior, and we know that we must introduce Him to and share Him with the whole world.

Can we whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,
Can we to men benighted
The lamp of life deny?

Of course, we can't, any more than we can deny them penicillin or polio vaccine.

Here, then, is the motive for Christian missions, the dynamic which has driven countless servants of the Cross into every land to proclaim the good news of redemption in Jesus Christ. If it savors of intolerance, then we Christians have been intolerant. But would you have it otherwise? Would you prefer that Christians should have luxuriated in the benefits of their religion and felt no compulsion to share Christ with other peoples whose religions held them down to a miserably low level of human life, and left them with no hope of life hereafter? Does Christianity have nothing to say to those cultures which, in the name of religion, promote terrorism, or permit such evils as the killing of babies and the burning of widows, and which even now maintain orphanages for cows but not for human beings? Shall we tolerate inhumanity in the world today, if, by preaching the Gospel to these people we can liberate them from the shackles of superstition, ignorance, fear and sin?

Let me illustrate what I mean. Armando Balaca was a Christian student in Angola, West Africa. On a hunting expedition one of the men from his village was attacked and mangled by a wounded leopard. His companions decided that he did not have a chance of recovery, and because leopard wounds are notoriously septic they did not even consider moving him to the village. They built a flimsy grass hut, placed their friend inside, fashioned a woven door, and lashed it tightly shut. As a parting gesture, they placed idols around the door to fend off evil spirits. Then they went home and left the wounded man to die. News travels fast in the African jungle, and when Armando heard of the disaster, he wondered if he, a Christian, could work among these people as a teacher and ignore a dying man. He knew virtually nothing about medicine, but he did know that salt water has cleansing power, and also that bandages can be sterilized. So, he took a few rags and boiled them in salt water to sterilize them. He came to the village and explained that he wanted to help the wounded hunter, but the people paid no attention to him. He hurried out to the hut, and there were the idols. A few years earlier Armando would have been as much afraid of idols as the next person, but he was a Christian now, no longer enslaved to primitive fear and superstition, so he tore them down, ripped the door from its lashings, and entered the hut, astonished to find the hunter still alive. Armando bathed the

wounds carefully with salt water. He bound the mangled hands with some of his sterilized rags. The man's nose proved more of a problem because the leopard had almost torn it from the face, but Armando simply put it in place again, then bound it down with a bandage which he firmly wrapped around the man's entire head. He remained with him day after day until healing took place. Today this wounded hunter, entirely well again, except for a scar arching over the bridge of his nose, will tell you his own story. He will tell you that he is alive because someone believed in Christ enough to care for him and save him. He is alive because someone, brought to Christ through the ministry of missions, refused to be tolerant of superstition, witchcraft, ignorance and fear.

So, let us be certain what we mean by the word "tolerance." If by tolerance we mean an appreciation of other people, if we mean friendliness and helpfulness, especially toward those who differ from us, then by all means let us have more of it. On the other hand, if we simply mean moral and spiritual indifference and laziness, an excuse for keeping in our own pockets the money that could bring salvation to other people around the world, then let us purge the word "tolerance" from our Christian vocabulary. It is that very attitude that brings the Church into contempt and makes it the laughingstock of materialistic peoples who themselves are passionately dedicated to winning the minds of people, and who will pay any price to achieve their purpose.

To the Church at Thyatira, if it regained its moral courage, and refused to countenance evil in any shape or form, the risen Lord promised the moral and spiritual leadership of the nations. The Church today longs to recover that lost leadership. It may do so only when it recovers the ability and the power to be intolerant of everything that grieves Christ.

AMEN.