

KING OF THE JUNGLE

SERMON TITLE: DIRE IN THYATIRA

REVELATION 2:18-29

Alan Wolfe is a sociologist from Boston University. Wolfe spent two years interviewing the American Middle Class about their beliefs, fears, and dreams. Predictably, Wolfe found that most Americans embrace three central values: *God, family, and country*. But Wolfe also identified a new value that's taken the culture by storm. This new virtue has become so entrenched in western civilization Wolfe refers to it as, "[The 11th commandment](#)" or simply, "[Thou shall not judge.](#)" *Tolerance* is now the supreme American more'.

Of course, America has always been tolerant of free speech, and differing lifestyles, and religious freedom. In fact, the right application of tolerance is not only an *American value*, it's a *Christian virtue*. In the political realm, Christians support the right of all religions to practice and proselytize their faith. Every human is made in the image of God and is born with a free will. Unlike Islam, Christianity doesn't use the sword to force compliance, it respects the choice God gave to every human being to decide their own destiny. Christians want all religions to have unlimited access to the marketplace of ideas. Whenever that happens the power of God's Word wins-over hearts and minds.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus predicted the wheat and the weeds - or believers and unbelievers - would grow up together side-by-side in the same field. It's not until the harvest, or the future judgment, that they're finally separated. This means that in the interim there has to be a certain tolerance for people who choose a different lifestyle or belief system than we do. It's the Christian's job not to uproot the weeds, and punish them, and rush them to judgment. We're called to influence them with love and turn them to Jesus.

Recall what Jesus said to the woman the Pharisees wanted to see stoned. **“Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.”** Jesus was the only person in the crowd with the right to uproot that weed, but instead He showed tolerance in hopes that she would repent. This is our role in the world today. Jesus will bring down the hammer when He returns. In the meantime, we're trying to love the world to repentance and faith. In this sense, Christians need to be tolerant people.

Yet tragically the definition of the term, **“tolerance”** has changed in recent years. Today's idea of **“tolerance”** is very different than it once was. Several decades ago, EM Forester wrote, **“Tolerance is a very dull virtue. It is boring... It is negative. It merely means bearing with people; being able to stand things.”** Prior generations defined tolerance, as **“putting up with something or someone not especially liked.”**

You tolerated the weather, or a burned dinner - but no one was naive enough to suggest a rainy day was better than a sunny day, or a charred piece of meat was as

delicious as a correctly-cooked cut of steak. To tolerate something didn't mean you had to respect it, or like it, or even agree with it - you just endured it.

But today, the virtue of tolerance has gotten a massive face lift. It means something very different. It's the assumption that "all values, all beliefs, all lifestyles, all truth claims should be given equal merit." In essence, there's no right or wrong - no good or bad - no ultimate authority - everything is relative.

Tolerance is no longer just respecting the right of someone to disagree. It's accepting their argument as equal to yours in weight, and authority, and benefit. Allan Bloom, author of "The Closing of the American Mind" writes of this new tolerance. It teaches that "In the past, men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, racism, chauvinism. But now rather than correct past mistakes and really be right; the point is to not think you are right at all." Today's tolerance assumes *nobody is perfectly right, and everybody is partially right...* The way out of our mess is no longer seriously sought. We just want everybody to be happy in the midst of the mess by making them feel good that they all have an opinion.

Dorothy Sayers puts it this way, "In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair, the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die." What she's saying is that today's tolerance is throwing in the towel on our quest for truth.

In modern, pluralistic America, the truth has become too risky. If we seek truth we'll offend someone, so in the name of tolerance we've succumbed to despair. And this is what had happened in the ancient Church at Thyatira. Today's new tolerance had taken over.

The Christians in Thyatira had lost their backbone. They refused to stand up for what was true, right, and loving. Thyatira was a church full of jellyfish. GK Chesterton said, "Tolerance is the virtue of the man who lost his convictions." That was true of certain believers in this fourth of the seven churches of Asia. I've entitled my message, "Dire in Thyatira." The situation was extreme, serious, alarming. The church was in dire straights. And Jesus gives a dire warning.

Jesus begins His letter in verse 18, and remember the reoccurring pattern common in these seven letters. First, there's a **revelation** - another glimpse at a specific trait of the glorified Christ we saw in chapter 1. Followed by a **commendation**. Churches are *not all bad* and *not all good*. There're no perfect churches. You'll find out soon, if you haven't already, churches are a mixed bag. From time to time *they need a pat on the back* - at other times, *they need a kick in the pants*. Thus, after the commendation comes a **correction**. In verse 20, Jesus has "a few things against them..."

Verse 18, "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, 'These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass...' Notice how Jesus introduces Himself. He's the Son of God, who sees and knows, and puts His foot down!

Remember, John and the early church to whom he writes were accustomed to Jesus' humility. The lowly carpenter from Nazareth was still fresh on their minds. When He worked a miracle, Jesus told them not to tell anybody. He went out of His way not to promote Himself or build a reputation. Jesus drove the PR people nuts. He avoided publicity. Jesus made it clear by word and deed, He'd come to serve, not be served.

But now Jesus is writing to these seven churches and He's reminding them that there's more to Him *now* than what He revealed *then*. His first coming was only part of the story. When He ascended to heaven He was clothed with glory, power, authority, dominion. Today, Jesus is the **King of the Jungle!** He roars, and reigns, and will soon rule. Don't take Him lightly. Yes, Jesus came as a *Lamb to the slaughter*, but His days as a sacrifice are over. He's also a Lion and today He's on the prowl - about to spring from the heavens. The Church needs to see their King - not just as He once was, but as He now is... It's a jungle out there, and Jesus is Lord of all lords and King of all kings.

Notice how He describes Himself to Thyatira... First, He's the "*Son of God.*" The first century believers didn't doubt His deity, but they were up-close and personal with His humanity. Now He puts His deity on display. The title, "*Son of God,*" blew their minds. In Hebrew thought the son of a goat is a goat. The son of a man is a man. Thus, the Son of God is God. And this is what exposes the deficient faith of both Mormons and Muslims. Yes, they pay respect to Jesus' earthly ministry, but they both deny His deity.

Jesus is not just a man come from God. He's God come to man - the second person of the Triune Deity. Unlike the many temples of their neighboring cities, Thyatira had only one - dedicated to Apollo, the sun god. The pagans worshipped the sun in the sky, but the believers worshipped its Creator, God's Son in heaven.

And the Son of God has "*eyes like a flame of fire.*" They're searching, and searing, and penetrating. Thyatira was the smallest and least important city of the seven cities Jesus mentions in Revelation 2-3. The believers there might've thought they could slip through the cracks. The Lord wouldn't pay attention to their little church. But not so, Jesus sees all. He now has X-ray vision. He cuts through the facade, and examines the heart. He sees every deed and thought.

And He's not afraid to put His foot down! "*His feet (are) like fine brass...*" Brass was the strongest metal known in the ancient world. Jesus has a heavy foot! Here's what comes to a shock to modern Americans who pride themselves on their tolerance. Jesus isn't afraid of offending people. The truth of God and glory of God is more important to Jesus than your feelings. Today's leaders can't make a simple decision, without issuing an apology to the special interest group they offended in the process. But when Jesus issues a decree He takes a stand on an immovable foundation. His truth is non-negotiable. His Word is eternal.

This is the *revelation* to the Church at Thyatira - now the **commendation**... verse 19, "*I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first.*" This was an active church - with a full slate of service

and good deeds. They were following Jesus' earthly example... You knew they believed by their love for each other. And they weren't greater than their Master. Jesus washed feet, and they too eagerly served one another. They did it believing that Jesus would use them.

Finally, they endured. Rather than a flash in the pan, they stuck with it... *Any Beatles' fans in the crowd?* Have you ever heard the Beatles tune that starts out, "Scrambled eggs, oh my baby how I love your legs." That's the first line of a famous tune written by Paul McCartney... *That was actually Paul's first attempt...* A f t e r several tries he swapped those lyrics for these, "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away." Now you recognize the tune, but the difference between "Scrambled Eggs" and "Yesterday" was endurance.

The Church at Thyatira loved, and served, and believed, and endured. And they grew in all the above. But here it comes... their *commendation* was quick, but their **correction** is long, and thorough, and painful. Verse 20, "Nevertheless I have a few things against you..." These are scary words from the King of the Jungle. Get out your notepad, there's a list to jot down.

And first on the list, "because you allow (or literally "tolerate." Several translations use that very word.) It's ironic, this church was more tolerant than Jesus. They allowed a false prophetess to have run of their church. It was *dire in Thyatira*. Church leaders allowed, "that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols."

There was a influential woman in the church at Thyatira. She had an *new message* that led to a *lewd lifestyle*.

Notice, in verse 20 she's called "*Jezebel*." Don't think a biblical name for your baby would be cool - then choose *Jezebel*. This was the most notorious gal in the Bible. Jezebel was the wicked witch from the north. Naming your daughter "*Jezebel*" is like naming a son "*Judas*," or "*Hitler*," or "*Steve Spurrier*." Don't do it!

More than likely, the word "*Jezebel*" was a nickname. There was a woman causing problems in the Church at Thyatira. She had taken over leadership. You've got to wonder, "*where were the men?*" Throughout the NT Christian men are given leadership roles in the church. But in Thyatira the men took a backseat. This gal had a charismatic personality, and a feigned spirituality. She called herself "*a prophetess*" and claimed to speak for God. She had a series of teaching DVDs she used to seduce and deceive unsuspecting Christians.

In OT Israel - a weak man, King Ahab - was dominated by a wicked woman, Jezebel. She became Ahab's queen and used her position of leadership to subvert her husband's rule and corrupt God's people. Likewise, the church at Thyatira had been hijacked by a woman. In the absence of strong men who were willing to step up and lead, a wily woman took control.

We read of the first Queen Jezebel in 1 Kings. She was from Phoenicia - *an idol worshipping pagan*. When she married into the Israeli royal family she brought with

her the false gods, Baal and Asherah - the gods of nature and fertility - power and perversion. Not only did she bring her idolatry, she sponsored 850 pagan prophets to spread their spiritual poison.

These were the priests Elijah challenged to a showdown on Mount Carmel. He wanted to expose the impotence of the idols and the power of the true God. *Which God could rain fire down from heaven?* Though the true God revealed Himself by sending a fire so hot it consumed the water-logged altar, the kingdom of Israel never fully recovered from Jezebel's influence. Her persuasion corrupted God's people, as did the Jezebel who was wrecking havoc in Thyatira.

Understand the nature of this woman's teaching... The city of Thyatira was 40 miles from Pergamos. It sat in a broad valley, along a Roman road that ran from the coast - inland. It became known as a commercial center that traded in wool, and medals, and purple dye. Acts 16 speaks of a woman in Philippi named Lydia - she was from Thyatira, and a "seller of purple."

In the Roman world wherever there was business there were trade guilds. Society revolved around these groups. It was foundational to the Roman way of life. The guilds were *part labor union, part fraternity, part family, part country club*. You spent your holidays at the guild. Your daughter would get married at the guild. The guilds also had a religious component. Each profession was dedicated to a pagan deity. Thus, to get a job in the garment industry you had to paid homage to the patron god of dye-making. That's how it worked.

Of course, this created an immediate problem for a Christian. If Jesus was Lord of all, how could he bow to anyone else? To attend their ceremonies, and eat their food - *in that context* - was agreement with their belief. How could a Christian indulge in the practices of the guild? During their gatherings folks got drunk. Party girls were hired. The meetings often became immoral affairs. *How could a Christian be part of this scene?* Yet, to avoid the guilds was professional suicide. If a Christian wasn't tolerant enough to find some way to compromise he couldn't work and feed his family.

One of the early church fathers, Tertullian, spoke of these trade guilds and the conflict they caused. He talked about a Christian painter who was hired to decorate a pagan temple, or a sculptor commissioned to carve an idol. *What should they do? How could a Christian employ the talents God had given him - to be used for His glory - in the glorification of an idol?* And yet the worker might argue, **“This is my living, I must live?”** Tertullian responded, **“Must you live?”** His point being, *Jesus is worth living for or dying for!* The true teachers insisted on **no compromise!**

Whereas Jezebel found a way around the conflict. She taught, *what's the big deal?* It's just a pinch of incense you're tossing on the altar of that idol. Your pledge is nothing but words - forgotten the next day. Even the wine and women won't hurt anybody. It's just one night. It's like a business trip to Vegas, or a fishing trip with your buddies, or tailgating on a Saturday. You're just fitting in. Doing what's expected. God

understands. You're just trying to placate your boss. It's just business. *You're doing it for your family!*

Jezebel had created a theology that tolerated sin, and justified compromise - even of a sexual variety. She created a rationale that separated *what the church believed* from *how the church behaved*. This is always unbiblical. It sets off a avalanche of immorality. I'm sure her prophetic words were part of the scam. She prophesied approval of what the Bible prohibits. I recall the scandal-prone Decatur pastor Earl Paulk justifying his adultery as "[kingdom relationships](#)." God made an exception for him. It sounded like Jezebel.

Jezebel was the Queen of Compromise. She concocted a way to justify *spiritual and sexual infidelity*. I can hear her now... [What's wrong with sex outside marriage as long as it involves two consenting adults? Who says homosexuality is a sin? The Bible was written long ago. Society is enlightened now. Attitudes about morality have evolved. Christians can't always take the Bible seriously. There's room for compromise.](#) All this nonsense we hear today, is the Jezebel drivel. It's more concerned with *satisfying glands* than *pleasing God*. It's an insistence on tolerance over truth.

Recently I was called in to help a church where the pastor had fallen into sexual sin. The first step we took was to remove the pastor from leadership. It was clear that he no longer met the biblical qualifications.

I'll never forget the church meeting where we explained our decision. One lady spoke up, "We don't care what he's done. We know he loves us and he's a good pastor. We still want him to lead our church." Here was a woman who saw no connection between a person's *spiritual condition* and their *moral character*. I had to tell her, "Whether you care or not, isn't the issue. God cares!" According to the Scriptures *spiritual life* will produce *moral purity* - the two go hand in hand.

You need to realize God isn't going to release Bible 2.0. He's planning no upgrades. It needs no updates. The Bible is timeless. It might be hard to obey for rebel hearts, but the Word speaks truth to every age. Jezebel watered it down and made up her own rules. She taught *you can tolerate sin and still love God* - but she taught wrong, and as we'll see in a minute, her followers in Thyatira suffered dire consequences.

Sadly though, this wasn't the last time the same evil spirit of Jezebel would infiltrate the Christian Church. It's no accident that Jesus' letter to Thyatira follows His letter to Pergamos - *the accommodating church*. Pergamos merged worldly structures and pagan practices into Christianity. The compromise that began in Pergamos, became full blown heresy in Thyatira. That's certainly what we see from a historical perspective. Each week we've noted how these local churches also parallel different eras of Church history.

Thyatira was the papal church of the Middle Ages - the period of church history dominated by corruption. The compromise with paganism that started with Emperor Constantine in the fourth century AD resulted in rampant idolatry and heresy in the

coming centuries. For instance, Mary went from being *a noble example* to the *mother of God*. All kinds of idolatrous notions arose – her *perpetual virginity, immaculate conception, ascension into heaven*. Today Roman Catholicism considers Mary *a co-redeemer* with our Lord Jesus. This is blasphemous. It's interesting, a woman led Thyatira into idolatry. Likewise, a woman's influence threatened the Medieval Church in a similar way.

Remember in the OT, Queen Jezebel falsely accused Naboth of blasphemy. She had him stoned so she could confiscate his vineyard. This was also the strategy used by the popes. The Inquisitions became a tool to kill off wealthy rivals, and confiscate vast riches. During this period the false doctrine of papal infallibility developed, and selling of forgiveness took place. Both were spiritual masks that promoted greed. Throughout the Middle Ages it was common for the supposedly celibate popes to keep mistresses and sire kids. The historical Church at Thyatira perfected the art of serving God while tolerating blasphemous sin.

It reminds me of the hunter and the bear. The hunter had the bear in the crosshairs of his rifle, when suddenly the bear spoke up. *“Hey, let's make a deal. What do you really want out of this transaction?”* The hunter replied, *“I'd really like a big, furry, bear-skin coat.”* The bear countered, *“I'd like a full stomach.”* After a few hours of negotiations, the bear got up and walked away. The hunter hasn't been seen since! *The moral of the story is beware of compromise!* Tolerance leads to compromise, which leads to heresy, which leads to corruption, which leads to judgment.

And Jesus has a dire warning for Thyatia. Verse 21, “And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed...” The followers of Jezebel failed to honor the *marriage bed*, so God promises them a *hospital bed*. Realize, Thyatira refused to see the correlation between a person’s physical behavior and his spiritual condition - so *God helps them connect the dots...* There’ll be a physical price to pay for their spiritual compromises. Their sin will cause their sickness.

Jesus continues in verse 22, “And those who commit adultery with her (will also be cast) into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds.” This is a dire-est warning yet! When we get to Revelation 6 the phrase “*great tribulation*” will scare you spit-less. It’s synonymous with horrible punishment. It’s sobering to realize people who were members of the Church, yet strayed far away through idolatry and immorality, may taste judgments that were designed - not for believers - but for this wicked, evil world.

According to Jesus the followers of Jezebel will miss the rapture... “*unless they repent of their deeds.*” And notice verse 21, Jesus “*gave her time to repent.*” He didn’t just lay down an ultimatum. He was merciful, gracious, patient. But there were limits to His patience. When the time is up... there’s no going back.

We all need to realize the role repentance plays in the Christian life... *Tolerance* worries about other people’s feelings. It avoids offending people. Whereas, *repentance* is concerned about pleasing God - how He feels about a situation -

whether He's offended or not. When was the last time you approached a situation and worried about how God feels about your actions? Who cares what you felt - or what your friends, or coworkers felt, you were focused on God's feelings. For some of you, that might not have ever happened. God has feelings too - and in the end pleasing God will be much wiser than pleasing myself or the crowd.

Repentance was the antidote for what ailed Thyatira. [Stop pleasing yourself and start pleasing the Lord.](#) And here's the irony, pleasing the Lord is also good for us. Why is it, we think **tolerance** is a loving virtue, while **intolerance** is cruel, and mean, and prejudicial. What kind of love is it that tolerates what's harmful and evil? If I really love someone I'll be intolerant of what's dangerous to their spiritual and physical health.

In fact, we're intolerant all the time in our society. You can't drink alcohol while driving a school bus... Or operate power tools unless you pass a drug test... It's not a loving expression for us to encourage you in behaviors we know are harmful to you and others. If the leaders of CC condoned immorality or tolerated false doctrine - if we didn't speak up and oppose what we know to be wrong - we'd be guilty of malpractice.

Here's an interesting comparison I ran across... Tolerance says, ["You must approve of what I do."](#) Love responds, ["I must do something harder; I will love you, even when your behavior offends me."](#) Tolerance says, ["You must agree with me."](#) Love replies, ["I'll do something harder; I'll tell you the truth, even if you don't like me afterwards,](#)

because I'm convinced it's the truth that will set you free." Tolerance says, "*You must allow me to go my way.*" Love responds, "I must do something harder; I'll risk a friendship and plead with you to follow the right way."

When you go to a doctor you want to hear the truth. Say your doc assures you, "**Man, you're a perfect specimen.**" Then you walk out of the office, and drop over of a heart attack. You'll be angry with the doctor. *You'll want to know why he wasn't honest* - you were a jelly doughnut away from the big one - and he covered it up. He lied. He withheld the whole truth. And what if he replied, "**Well, I knew your body was in worse shape than the Pillsbury doughboy, but if I tell people stuff like that, they'll get offended. It's bad for business. They won't come back. I want my office to be a safe place where folks feel loved and accepted.**"

This is exactly the same reason some pastors give for avoiding tough texts, and steering clear of controversial topics. Churches today think its their job to dilute the truth, rather than give it to us straight. My job isn't to grind up the Bible into indiscernable mush where its ingredients are no longer recognizable. It's *not up to me* to twist the Word, or dole it out in small bites, or alter it. It's *up to you* to soften your heart and receive the Word. Repent and change is your part.

And if the compromisers in Thyatira don't repent, Jesus tells us in verse 23 what He'll do - *and it's not pretty*, "**I will kill her children** (or her followers) **with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.**" I hope you notice these words are

in red letters! That means they're the words of Jesus... But this isn't some soft, sissy Jesus - *a figment of someone's imagination*. This is battle-ready Jesus. He's willing to go to war - and not just with the evil *out there*, but with the evil *in here*. First, He cleans up His own church. In the words of 1 Peter 4:17, "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God..."

It's true, the same Jesus who died to *save your soul* will *bust your chops* if you try to play Him for a fool, and pretend He doesn't care about how you really live. You show your love for Jesus by how you work, and have sex, and spend money, and order your daily life.

Remember what happened to the OT Jezebel? She was thrown from a tower, crushed under chariot wheels, then picked apart by a pack of wild dogs. Why will Jesus treat this Jezebel and her followers any differently? Their sins was basically the same. Jesus makes Jezebel an example to all churches who flirt with spiritual compromise and sexual sin.

Verse 24, "Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come." Here's a positive for the Church in Thyatira. Not everyone had been duped by Jezebel. Not all believers had plunged the depths of Satan, and learned the dark art of how to *sin* and *serve* simultaneously. This church still had faithful believers. And here the Lord tells them to simply "*hold fast.*" Remember that God's truth always trumps tolerance!

I think verse 24 brings up an provocative point. Thyatira represented a compromised religious system, yet there were church members who managed not to be contaminated. This proves it's possible to be a true believer even in a heretical environment. For example, *is Catholicism guilty of idolatry when it comes to Mary, and the mass, and papal infallibility?* Absolutely! But that doesn't make idolaters out of all Catholics. There are bonafide believers in every church who live a genuine faith. They submit to God's Word, and cling to His grace, and have faith in Christ alone.

And to these true believers, Jesus promises in verse 26, **“And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations...”** The person who submits to Jesus now, will rule with Him then... Jesus will return to this Earth to reign with a rod. Jesus quotes Psalm 2 - *the big stick passage...* **“He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels'...”** Like breaking clay jars with a bat - when He returns Jesus will crush the ungodly with an enforced righteousness. The Age of Tolerance will come to an end!

As does His dire letter to Thyatira, **“As I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.”** Here's the Master's gift to the believer who overcomes the spirit of compromise - and refuses to accommodate sin in an age of misguided tolerance. Jesus promises **“the morning star.”** This is the star that turns off the night, and ushers in the day. It's the last light to appear in the sky just before daybreak.

And what event does this sound like? How about the rapture of the Church. Just before the Day of the Lord's judgment rises over planet Earth, the Church will be treated to an early exit. Jesus will snatch us away.

Jesus is coming back. **Jesus is what's next!** So be faithful. Hold fast to the truth. Pay attention to this dire warning in Thyatira. Verse 29, **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."**