

THE DANGER OF HYPER-TOLERANCE

Revelation 2:12-17

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In our society tolerance has become the supreme virtue. The worst thing you can be called is intolerant. Today everyone gets a trophy; feelings are more important than facts; 2+2 equals whatever you want it to.
2. Tolerance no longer means what it used to mean. Today, tolerance means not criticizing or condemning anyone's beliefs or behavior. It means accepting all beliefs and all behaviors are equally valid and good.
3. But is our society's definition of tolerance Biblical? Is it possible to be too tolerant?

II. TEXT: Revelation 2:12-17

1. 12 "Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum: Thus says the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword:
 - i. This is the third of Christ's letters to the seven churches in Asia, or what is now part of Turkey. This particular letter was written to the church in the city of Pergamum.
 - ii. "Angel" refers to the messenger to the church, or the pastor.
2. 13 I know where you live—where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me,, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives.
 - i. "Where Satan's throne is."
 1. Pergamum was filled with idolatry:
 - a. Asia's leading religious center.
 - b. The temple of Dionysus was there, the god of wine and drunkenness.
 - c. The temple of goddess Athena was there.
 - d. The temple of the goddess Roma was there.
 - e. There was a huge throne shaped altar to Zeus, king of the gods, that rose forty feet high into the air. It smoked all day long with the smoke of sacrifices offered to Zeus.
 - f. The temple of Asklepios was there, the god of healing. His symbol was a serpent. Today the most common logo for medical associations and doctors and hospitals is the staff of Asklepios, which is a staff with a serpent around it. People all over the world would travel to Pergamum to seek healing at the temple of Asklepios. In part of the temple nonpoisonous snakes crawled on the floor. The sick would lay on the floor so the snakes could crawl on them, and whichever part of your body they would was supposedly healed.
 2. It was the center of emperor worship in the province of Asia. It was the first city in Asia to build a temple to Caesar – they had a temple dedicated to the worship of Caesar Augustus. In Pergamum worship

of the emperor was required. You were required to say, "Caesar is Lord." Most scholars agree this is why it was given the title of Satan's throne.

- ii. "Yet you are holding on to my name." In spite of the persecution, with even one of their own being martyred – Antipas – they did not fall away from the faith.
3. 14 But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. 15 In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.
- i. In spite of their endurance in the face of persecution, Christ had something against them. They were tolerating a certain group of sinners and false teachers.
 - ii. "The teaching of Balaam." In the OT, the king of the Moabites, Balak, tried to hire the prophet Balaam to put a curse on the Israelites, but Balaam could not, because God only wanted to bless them. Instead, Balaam gave King Balak some advice as to how to overcome the Israelites. He told him to use the women of Moab to seduce the men of Israel into sexual relationships, and through those relationships lead them to worship the false god Baal. And that's exactly what happened. This caused God to send a plague against Israel, killing twenty-four thousand Israelites.
 - iii. "In the same way, you... have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans." There was a group in the church of Pergamum who were following the teaching of Balaam – they were called the Nicolaitans. They taught that it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.
 - iv. And instead of demanding that these people repent, the church was tolerating them. Letting them stick around.
4. 16 So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is inscribed that no one knows except the one who receives it.
- i. "Hidden manna" refers to the eternal life that Jesus offers. In John 6:58 He called himself the bread from heaven. "The one who eats this bread will live forever."
 - ii. "White stone, and... a new name is inscribed." Back then a very common custom was to carry an amulet or charm, often just a small pebble. On the pebble was the name of a god. This was a way of getting the god to watch over and protect you. And if you were the only one who knew the name inscribed on it, then it had even more power.
 1. William Barclay "Most likely what John is saying is, 'Your heathen friends carry amulets with superstitious inscriptions on them and they think they will keep them safe. You need nothing like that; you are

safe in life and in death because you know the name of the only true God.”

III. BIG IDEA

1. The church in Pergamum was both praised and rebuked. They were praised for holding on to the faith in the midst of persecution. They were condemned for hyper-tolerance. They had church members who were living in open sin – eating meat sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality. The church leadership were not committing these sins. The majority of the church were not committing these sins. Yet they were tolerating these sins. They were not disciplining the sinners in the church. Their sin was hyper-tolerance. The church must not tolerate sin in its membership.
2. As I mentioned earlier, the contemporary notion of tolerance means not criticizing or condemning anyone else’s behavior. It means accepting all beliefs and all behaviors as equally valid and good. That’s not true tolerance. That’s hyper-tolerance. False tolerance.
3. There are a couple of problems with this new definition of tolerance:
 - i. It is self-contradicting.
 1. If all views are equally valid, what about the view that all views are not equally valid?
 2. A few years ago, right before the Academy Awards, author John Irving wrote an article in the Hollywood Reporter urging Oscar winners to make the most of their acceptance speech. He said, whatever you says, “Tolerance of intolerance is unacceptable.” In other words, he was advising his Hollywood community to be intolerant of intolerance. But if you are intolerant of anything, then you can’t claim to be intolerant of intolerance.
 - ii. It is impossible to live out.
 1. Nobody truly treats all ideas as equally valid, or all behaviors as equally good. Nobody is completely tolerant. The people who claim to be the most tolerant are the same people who call everyone who disagrees with them racist, sexist, fascist, and a threat to democracy. In other words, they are not tolerant of every behavior and every idea, because they are intolerant of racism, sexism, fascism, and threats to democracy.
 2. Nobody believes that all ideas are equally valid. And nobody approves of all behaviors. Everyone criticizes and disagrees with some ideas and some behaviors.
 3. This is why the modern definition of tolerance doesn’t work.
 4. Disagreeing with someone doesn’t mean you are intolerant. Disapproving of someone’s behavior doesn’t make you intolerant. Otherwise everyone is intolerant, especially Jesus and the authors of the Bible, because they had strong views about truth and error, right and wrong.

4. The classic definition of tolerance meant treating people with love and respect, even if you disagree with their beliefs and disapprove of their behaviors. This is true tolerance. This is Biblical tolerance.
5. The virtue of tolerance comes from the New Testament of the Bible.
 - i. **Matthew 5:43-45** “43 You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy. 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
 - ii. **Romans 12:18-20** “18 If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God’s wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay,, says the Lord. 20 But If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.”
6. True tolerance does not pretend that all beliefs are equally valid. It does not pretend that all behaviors are equally good. It does not accept false teaching; it does not praise sinful behavior. It holds to the truth; it stands for what is right; it resists falsehood and evil; yet it treats with love and respect those with whom it disagrees.
7. Today many Christians and many churches have adopted the world’s definition of tolerance. They think it is intolerant to disagree with anyone’s beliefs or to condemn anyone’s behavior. Churches are so afraid of losing members and of being labeled intolerant that they no longer preach against sin, and they no longer practice church discipline.
8. This was the sin of the church in Pergamum. They were committing the sin of hyper-tolerance because they were allowing their church members to live in sin.
9. But the Bible gives very clear instructions about how to treat sinners with tolerance. If they are not Christians and not members of the church, they are to be welcomed into the church so they can hear the gospel. However, if they are members of the church, they are to be lovingly restored. If they refuse to repent, they are to be expelled until they change their minds.
10. As a church, we must beware of the sin of hyper-tolerance.

IV. THE DANGERS OF HYPER-TOLERANCE

1. The sinner will face God’s wrath.
 - i. If the sinner does not repent, they will face God’s wrath. If they are a non-Christian, they will go to hell. If they are a Christian, they face God’s discipline. This point is expressed to the church in Pergamum.
 - ii. **Revelation 2:16** “So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”
 - iii. If we truly love people, then we must warn them about incurring God’s wrath.
 - iv. **James 5:19-20** “19 My brothers and sisters, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let that person know that whoever

turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

- v. This is what Jesus did.
 - vi. **Luke 13:3** “No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as well.”
2. The sinner will be miserable.
 - i. Sin is its own punishment. We were not created to live in sin. Sin is not good for us. It is like poison in our minds and bodies. If the sinner continues in sin, they will become more and more miserable.
 - ii. If we truly love people, then we must try to lift them out of sin, not enable their sin, or affirm their sin.
 3. The sinner will not be disciplined.
 - i. The purpose of the church is to make disciples; to help people become more like Jesus; less sinful.
 - ii. If we do not identify sin and encourage people to repent, then they will not grow in Christ. The church will not fulfill its God-given purpose.
 4. God will be displeased with us.
 - i. We see this in Christ’s letter to the church in Pergamum. Because they were tolerating sin in their membership, He said, “But I have a few things against you (Rev 2:14).”
 - ii. If Christ is displeased with us, then it means that we are living in sin, and that in turn will lead to painful consequences for us.
 5. The evil will spread.
 - i. In the church in Corinth, a man was sleeping with his father’s wife. Paul told the church to kick the man out. Why?
 - ii. 1 Corinthians 5:6 “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little leaven, leavens the whole batch of dough?”
 - iii. It only takes a little leaven, a little yeast, to cause the whole loaf rise. In the same way, if you allow just a little evil, it will spread and infect others.
 - iv. Evil is contagious. Others will adopt his behavior. Others will see that if the church tolerates it, then it must be okay. Or they will sin in other ways. If the church tolerates that sin, then they have to tolerate my sin too.
 6. Christ’s reputation will suffer.
 - i. The church’s mission is to preach about Jesus. To introduce Jesus to the world. Our mission is to teach the world that Jesus is both Savior and Lord. Savior and Judge. He is loving and holy.
 - ii. But when we are hyper-tolerant, we are only preaching a one-dimensional Jesus. We are teaching that He is Savior, but leaving out the Judge. Savior, but leaving out the Lord. We are preaching His love, but we are leaving out His holiness. We are preaching about the forgiveness of sin, but leaving out the consequences of sin. We are preaching about heaven with Christ, but leaving out the possibility of hell without Christ.

V. HOW TO AVOID HYPER-TOLERANCE IN THE CHURCH

1. We must not subscribe to the world’s definition of tolerance.

- i. Tolerance falls under the category of Christian love. True tolerance does not mean agreeing with a person's beliefs and applauding their behavior. It means treating a person with love even though we disagree with them and disapprove of their behavior.
- ii. What is Biblical love? Love does not mean affirming someone's choices. It does not mean agreeing with someone's beliefs. It does not mean sweeping someone's sin under the rug.
- iii. Love means doing what is best for someone, not what makes them feel good; it means giving people what they need, not what they want.
- iv. We must love the sinner, but hate the sin; love the sinner, but reject their heresy.
- v. And sometimes the loving thing to do is to tell the person they need to repent; they are headed for danger; without Christ they will perish.

2. Sin must be addressed from the pulpit.

- i. A preacher's job is not to entertain; not to be funny; not to just encourage you and make you feel good.
- ii. **2 Timothy 4:2** "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and teaching."
- iii. Preachers must preach against sin from the pulpit.
- iv. Some preachers are very vague about sin. They say "Don't sin; stop sinning; sin is bad; God hates sin; sin will hurt you."
- v. Biblical preaching gets specific about sin. It calls out sin. It names sin for what it is. "Homosexuality is a sin. Changing your gender is a sin. Premarital sex is a sin. Adultery is a sin. Abortion is a sin. Living together before marriage is a sin. Pornography is a sin."

3. The sinner must be confronted.

- i. When someone in the church is living in unrepentant sin, they are to be confronted. This confrontation is to be done in love, for the purpose of restoration.
 - 1. **Galatians 6:1** "Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted."
- ii. The purpose is not to shame the person; to fuss at the person; to give the person a piece of your mind; to kick them out of the church. The purpose is restoration – to encourage and help them to get back on to the right track.
- iii. In Matthew 18, Jesus says that it is best to keep things private at first, and then involve more people if necessary.
 - 1. **Matthew 18:15-17** "15 If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 But if he won't listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established., 17 If he doesn't pay attention to them, tell the

church. If he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you."

- iv. What is very clear is that overt, blatant sin and heresy must be confronted. It must not be tolerated. Paul told Titus to silence those who are teaching false doctrine, and to rebuke them sharply (Titus 1:11-13). He told the church in Thessalonica to warn those who disobeyed his instructions (1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:14-15).

4. The unrepentant must be expelled.

- i. Biblical church discipline goes beyond a verbal warning or a personal plea for repentance. If a person refuses to repent, they are to be expelled from the church.
- ii. **Matthew 18:17** "If he doesn't pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you."
- iii. **1 Corinthians 5:1-2** "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father's wife. 2 And you are arrogant! Shouldn't you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?"
- iv. We never want it to go this far. We hope we never have to tell someone that they are not welcome at church. But if they refuse to repent, if they ignore multiple warnings, then they must be expelled.

5. We must be willing to suffer for Christ.

- i. **2 Timothy 2:3** "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."
- ii. To avoid hyper-tolerance in an age of hyper-tolerance, we must be willing to suffer.
- iii. When you practice appropriate church discipline, it is possible that some people will leave; attendance will drop; tithes and offerings will decrease; people will criticize and condemn.
- iv. We must remember that it is impossible to serve Christ faithfully without being persecuted at some level.
- v. **2 Timothy 3:12** "In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."
- vi. As a church, our goal must be faithfulness, not to be liked. We must seek the approval of God, not the approval of the world. We must prioritize health, not size; better, not bigger.
- vii. If we are not willing to receive pushback, then we won't be willing to address evil when it is in our midst.

VI. CONCLUSION

- 1. Mr. Frog lived in a hole in the ground with his wife and children. One day Mr. Cockroach knocked on the door and said, "I don't have a place to stay; can I stay here for the night?" He saw how dirty and stinky the cockroach was and said, "No, we don't really have the space," but his wife interrupted him and said, "Honey, we have plenty of space. Be nice and let him stay." So Mr. Frog invited Mr. Cockroach

to stay for the night. The next day Mr. Mouse knocked on the door and said, "I don't have a place to sleep tonight. Can I stay with you?" Once again, he saw how dirty and stinky Mr. Mouse was, and he said, "No, we don't have the room." But his wife insisted. "Honey, be nice. We have plenty of room." So he invited Mr. Mouse to stay for the night. The next night Mr. Snake knocked on the door and said, "I don't have a place to stay tonight. Can I stay with you?" He saw that the snake looked scary and dangerous, so he said, "No, we don't really have the room." But his wife insisted, "Honey, be nice to Mr. Snake. We have plenty of room." So Mr. Frog invited Mr. Snake into his home, and that night Mr. Snake at Mr. Frog and his entire family."

2. What happened to Mr. and Mrs. Frog? They were so focused on being nice that they destroyed themselves. How can you destroy yourself by being nice? They were so focused on being nice, that they lost sight of the other virtues. They forgot about being wise. They forgot about responsibility for their kids.
3. That can happen to the church too. We can be so focused on tolerance that we destroy ourselves. Can you be too focused on tolerance? Yes, if you forget about the other virtues. Tolerance isn't the only Christian virtue. What about wisdom, holiness, loving God?
4. When you focus on tolerance at the expense of the other virtues, the result is destruction. True tolerance is helpful; hyper-tolerance is destructive.
 - i. In the name of tolerance, men are being invited into women's restrooms.
 - ii. In the name of tolerance, men have been allowed to compete against women and are destroying women's sports.
 - iii. In the name of tolerance, doctors are mutilating the bodies of children who suffer from gender dysphoria.
 - iv. In the name of tolerance, children are being forced to watch drag queens perform.
 - v. In the name of tolerance, Christian bakers are being shut down for refusing to make a cake for a gay wedding.
 - vi. In the name of tolerance, the U.S. government is allowing drugs and dangerous criminals to cross our southern border.
 - vii. This mindset has infected Christians.
 - viii. In the name of tolerance, parents won't discipline their kids.
 - ix. In the name of tolerance, preachers won't talk about hell.
 - x. In the name of tolerance, churches are affirming same-sex marriage.
 - xi. In the name of tolerance, churches refuse to preach about sin, and to confront members who are living in sin.
5. As a result many Christians are losing their saltiness, and many churches are becoming impure, ineffective, and irrelevant to a lost and dying world that desperately needs the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us beware of the sin of hyper-tolerance.