

[Slide 1]

## Living Faithfully in Tolerant Times

[Slide 2] Revelation 2:12-17

[Slide 3] Suppose you are taking a personality test, which instructs you to choose adjectives that describe you. Which of the following would you choose?

Neat. Friendly. Outgoing. Introverted. Quiet. Talkative.

I imagine if we could compile results, we would get mixed results on all of these. For each of these, some of us would choose the adjective, while others would not.

But what about this adjective: "Intolerant." Would any of you describe yourself as intolerant?

Today, the word "intolerant" has become a "boo" word, a word that stirs up negative emotions. No one wants to be described as intolerant.

That gives us a little bit of a problem, at least for those of us who desire to be faithful to Christ. He called for a tolerant church to become intolerant of incorrect ideas.

Of course, this runs contrary to our age. Today the goal is tolerance. The general idea is "We've got to stop being intolerant of other people's beliefs. Everyone should have a right to his or her own opinion on any matter." Usually those who espouse this view will in the next breath shout that that any system of thought claiming exclusive truth is wrong. Those who make the biggest fuss about tolerance are intolerant of the absolutes of Christianity.

### What Did Christ Say?

[Slide 4] **In the culture, there is challenge**

"I know where you live..." Pergamum comes from the word for marriage, "gamos". There was a wedding between the society and the government. Pergamum was the first site of emperor worship and thus it is likely this is in view when Christ refers to Satan's throne. The Enemy is in charge in Pergamum. If Ephesus was the New York of Asia because of the commercial activity, then Pergamum was its Washington, D.C. It was the seat of government for Rome's rule over the provinces of Asia.

It was a great seat of culture and the arts. There was a library there which rivaled the great library in Alexandria.

History tells us that Pergamum was a very permissive place. There was a plethora of gods to choose from, and their worship nearly always involved the witness of or

participation in sexual expression. Christ refers to the teaching of Balaam as a description of the pressures of serving Him in Pergamum. What's this guy Balaam all about? Basically, the life of Balaam was about profits and pleasure. He advised a foreign king named Balak to seduce the children of Israel through sexual immorality, all in order to collect a paycheck.

Put all that together, and what you have in Pergamum is seduction or persecution. It is the choice of evils that was offered to the church. A self-serving, permissive society can suddenly turn curiously hard on those who refuse to go along. Either you buy or you burn.

That is Satan's M.O. He seduces and, if that doesn't work, he persecutes.

### **[Slide 5] In the church, there is compromise**

Christ doesn't lump everyone in the same category. He knows who we are. He doesn't stereotype.

He starts out by affirming them. They have laid it all on the line. They have sacrificed deeply for the cause. Even at the present they were holding on to His name, i.e., His character. They had let God be God, rather than make Him into someone else. The God who we want and the God who is may not be the same thing. Mark Twain once said, "God made man in His own image, and then man returned the favor."

To put it another way, they had not begun the worship of the Mush God. Have you heard of the Mush God? He is the prevailing deity in today's culture. He is the god of the politicians who shows up at all the ribbon-cutting ceremonies, the father of the innocuous and harmless prayer.

The Mush God is very proud that his beliefs and doctrines are completely non-irritating and non-offensive. He has no theology to speak of. His is a pure Cream of Wheat type of divinity. Here is finally a God that doesn't believe in strictness and rigidity. People just love this Mush God because he is so very easy to get along with.

The Mush God has no particular credo, no tenets of faith, nothing that would make it difficult for either the believer or the nonbeliever alike to lower their heads when he speaks. In fact the Mush God is not a jealous god at all, and will gladly share the platform with any other gods that anyone might have.

The Mush God is a serviceable god who will fit in anywhere. His laws are chiseled not on tablets of stone, but they are written on sand which allows his laws to be open to amendment, qualification, change, and erasure.

Here is a God that will compromise with you. He will gladly relax the rules. And most people just love him for that and are all too happy to follow him, wherever he might lead them. But he never seems to lead anybody anywhere.

Hanging onto Christ's name (person, character) means that we reject all the caricatures of Him. STILL Christ challenged them because they had erroneous belief systems in their midst which they evidently have tolerated. The Nicolaitans, seen previously in Ephesus, are also here. Here their teachings are in view, not their practices. Beliefs always express themselves in actions. Every action you take has a belief behind it.

The Nicolaitans were along the same lines of the teaching of Balaam, the profits and pleasure guy. It is the old combination of money and sex; throw in the oppressive Roman government and you have the old unholy trinity: money, sex, and power.

But ultimately the church at Pergamum, in the end, has to reckon with Christ, not the false prophets and not the Roman government. Some within the Roman government had the power of the sword. Those who had the right of the sword had the power of life and death; on their word, someone could be executed on the spot. Christ wanted the church to know that He still had the last word. He is one who has the sharp, two-edged sword (v. 12) and it is His word (v. 16).

The battle we fight with our culture is not through the weapons of protest or the ballot box. Those are carnal weapons. Frankly, it does not matter who is in the Oval Office. We will only prevail through the word of God and, if you do not give yourself to study it, to know it, and to live it, you are ill-equipped to deal with our tolerant yet vicious culture.

Christ had gifts for the church at Pergamum if they would heed His words. He would give them His presence. [Slide 6] Hidden manna is probably a reference to the manna that had been placed in the Ark of the Covenant, representative of God's presence. He would also give them His provision. He would take care of them and their needs. Christians were frequently the object of economic persecution and unable to join the guilds of certain trades. [Slide 7] We can't be for certain about what the white stone represents but one interpretation points to the ancient Roman practice of distributing free food. In order to get your food, you had to have a white stone, distributed by the government. It was white so that the name could be clearly seen on it. As we said earlier, name indicates character so the promise is that in the process of trusting God's provision, we become different people with refined characters.

## Conclusion

If you heard me say this morning that as a church we need to get back to doing church the way we did it in the 1950's, then you heard me wrong. That is not how we address the compromise and toleration of our day.

Jesus held up one individual for recognition, an individual named Antipas whom He described as His faithful witness. Interestingly, Jesus applied one of His own titles to this man. If we can even begin to remotely resemble Christ, our redemptive influence in this community will skyrocket.

He is a faithful witness. Half of the description (faithful) speaks to commitment and fidelity, an unwavering loyalty to Christ and His Word. The other half (witness) speaks to relevance, to engagement with the surrounding culture.

Notice in verse 12, Christ writes to the church IN Pergamum. [Slide 8] There was a church there. That's where Christ always wants the church to be. He said while we are not to be of the world, we must be in the world. Just like He is the light of the world, we are the light of the world but not if we hide our light in isolation and in the bushel of the walls of this church. Has this building become the bushel? My guess is that it has.

It is easy to be faithful if you don't care anything about being relevant. And it is easy to be relevant if you don't care anything about being faithful. The trick is to be both. Striving to be both Biblically faithful and culturally relevant is what it means to be a faithful witness. [Slide 9] You can't be a witness in a monastery. You can't be a witness if you are interacting with the culture. When interacting with the culture, we must be careful to remain faithful.

I think I know churches that are neither. I know churches that are doing a good job of being both. Failure at either point is still compromise, either the compromise of our message or the compromise of our mission.

(Hold up Bible and cell phone) Nearly every moment of my life, I am within reaching distance of both of these objects. The same is probably true of you. I heard a man say recently that he owes his life to both of them. The Bible gave him eternal life. His cell phone made a 911 call after he suffered an accident while alone at home and it saved his earthly life.

Sure if I had to pick one, I'd pick the Bible. But if I'm dying and I can't call for help, there's a good chance I won't be around the next day to read this Bible.

The danger in a tolerant yet intolerant world, a world where those who refuse the seduction will be persecuted, is to isolate ourselves and only strive to be biblically faithful. God did not give us that option. If we are not culturally relevant, seeking to engage the world, being the salt of the earth as well as the light of the world, then we are not biblically faithfully either.