

September 29, 2024

Revelation 2:16-28

My great-grandfather, Godfrey Schulz, was a public school teacher in southern Milwaukee during the 1940's and 50's, and although he was an excellent teacher and had served as a principal at a Lutheran grade school- he just couldn't get a principal position in the public school system! He had proven for years that he was capable of the job, but each time he applied for an open position, someone else, typically less qualified than he, kept getting the job! Why? Because he wasn't a Freemason. The Freemasons are a secret society for men that goes back hundreds of years, and holds secret meetings with different rituals, traditions, rites, and so on. Much isn't known about them, but what is very clear is that in order to be a member of the Freemasons, you must worship and swear an oath to "god," which they would define not as Jesus or the Christian God, but as the gods of several religions- so although they are a men's club, they also hold very specific religious views of who God is that directly contradict Scripture, and therefore to be a member, swear their oaths, take part in their rituals and worship is to worship a false god. So why do people join? Connections. In business, success and promotions often aren't given because of what you know, but who you know. So, if you are a teacher in the public school district and the superintendent is a member of the Masonic Lodge, then it makes sense to join so he happens to notice you and promote you. But Godfrey Schulz was a devout Christian man who treasured Jesus and refused to give any kind of worship to anyone less, so he never joined, and he had to wait a long time before getting what he deserved. It was a sacrifice that he considered worth making because Jesus is so good. Many men of this congregation made similar sacrifices- especially in a smaller town where connections are so important- when they made a choice: "Which God will I worship" and didn't join what was a very large and powerful masonic lodge here in town! I hear stories of fathers dropping off their wives and children here at St. John's and worshiping somewhere else because St. John's, unlike many churches, told their members, "You must choose which God you are going to worship. You can't worship the true God on Sunday and a false God on every other Wednesday," and the congregation's reputation likely took a hit in the community. A sacrifice worth making- because Jesus is so good.

The Christians in Thyatira made similar sacrifices. Unlike the churches in Pergamum, Smyrna, and Ephesus, we don't get the impression that they were being hunted down and killed. Thyatira was a smaller, mostly blue collar kind of city. It was a place of industry, much of the region's textiles, materials, leathers, metal works, and other materials were manufactured here in Thyatira- these were farmers, artisans, blacksmiths, tailors, dyers, stone masons. And just like today, if you wanted to get ahead in business, you needed to know people. You needed connections. So, they formed guilds. There was a guild for all different jobs, and these guilds provided you with business connections! But these guilds, like the Freemasons, also practiced religious rituals to false gods, and in order to be a member of the guild and get the benefits, you had to worship the gods with them and eat the meat sacrificed to their idols. And they refused, and their businesses suffered, and Jesus immediately tells them, "Good work." Jesus reminds

them that he is THE Son of God- and no one else, and that his eyes are flames of fire- he sees all things and his feet are like bronze- they are solid and unmovable- meaning that Jesus doesn't change his mind. The truth that he tells us doesn't change over time. And this church knew this and they were growing in faith! They weren't like the church in Ephesus who had lost their love and headed in the wrong direction- they were more loving, more sacrificial, more selfless, more joyful in Jesus than they were before, and Jesus commended them for it! But something was wrong.

Remember that ancient churches didn't often come together and worship in a big building like we do. The church in Thyatira was likely a group of house churches that met together a few times a week to worship, and were served by a small group of elders or pastors, and maybe they all came together once in a while. And in this church there was a woman whose name was probably not Jezebel- and if you read our first lesson from today you'll understand why no one would name their daughter that, but according to Jesus, she was doing exactly what Jezebel did. She claimed to be a prophetess, someone who had direct knowledge and insight from God- which wasn't unheard of- there were prophetesses in the New Testament. But she was a fraud. She wasn't getting her insights from God. She preached what people wanted to hear: "You can have your God, and you can have your sex and your false gods too!" She was sleeping with other Christians, and encouraging them to do the same, and also telling Christians that they can and should worship the other gods if it means good business and status in the community. Jesus is clear: "I'm going to kill those who follow her. She is going to suffer, her followers are going to die, and people are going to hear about it and know that I, Jesus, am the one who decides what's right and wrong in my church, and I will not tolerate unrepentance, lies, and deception." Jesus says, "And the rest of you, get away from her. Hold fast to what you know is true. And I'm going to give you something so beautiful, so powerful, so wonderful you can't even fathom it: my glory. My honor. A place on my throne."

Wow. There's a lot to talk about, but there are mainly two things we can take from this: 1. "Tolerant" doesn't mean "loving". 2. "Strict doesn't mean hateful."

1. "Tolerant" doesn't mean "loving." Sometimes, when I tell people that I'm the pastor at St. John's, people say, "Oh! So you're the *strict* Lutherans!" Has that happened to anyone here? I know that there are churches in America and in this town that preach tolerance, tolerance, tolerance, that whatever you want to believe about God, however you want to define the Christian life, God's okay with it- just be a loving person. I'd like to make this point: That's not loving, and it's not even that tolerant. Penn Gillette is a world-renowned illusionist who does high production-value magic shows in Las Vegas- he's a great performer. He's also an outspoken atheist who has a clear disdain for religion. But I'd like you to consider his quote: "I don't respect people who don't proselytize... How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?" He's absolutely right. If I saw that you were

rowing a boat toward a cliff and I said, “well, who am I to judge,” that wouldn’t be loving. That would be hateful. According to Jesus, and common sense, tolerating all beliefs in God as equally valid really isn’t loving, nor is it really that tolerant. One of the major church bodies in America recently had a national meeting with all their leaders and thousands of pastors. In that meeting, they announced that they would no longer teach that it is necessary to believe in Jesus to be saved, that they would instead teach that it’s possible for people of other religions to be saved, even if they reject Jesus- as long as they tried to be faithful to their god, and they actually invited members of other religions to stand up on the stage with them and declared that they were saved, even if they didn’t trust or love Jesus- very tolerant! During the discussion, one pastor came up to the microphone, and said, “This is wrong. Jesus states in John 14, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’ Jesus clearly teaches that he is the only way to salvation, and I’m here to express that truth, even if it’s an inconvenient truth.” How did the thousands of pastors respond? They shook their heads in disgust. Then, another pastor came to the microphone and said, “I’m frankly embarrassed that we are even having this conversation in front of our interfaith (non-Christian) brothers and sisters,” she was embarrassed that someone quoted Jesus! And everyone cheered. The proposal passed by a landslide vote, and now one of the largest Christian church bodies in America teaches that faith in Jesus isn’t necessary to be saved- but let me ask you- did those people seem tolerant to you? Were they tolerant and open-minded to their brother, to Jesus’ words? No, they seemed, dare I say it, strict about their non-strictness. No church is truly tolerant. All churches are strict about *something*. The question is, what are we going to be strict about? What is Jesus strict about, and why is he strict?

2. “Strict” doesn’t mean “unloving”. Does Jesus seem a little strict in this part of Revelation? What about our Gospel reading in Mark? I’d say so. But what is he strict about? *Idolatry*- worshiping other gods. In the case of this Jezebel, it’s clear that she is a powerfully charismatic, charming, and likely attractive person, and it seems like she was offering a “deeper” version of Christianity: “if you *really* want to know the secrets of the Bible, the secrets of God, and get in touch with the hidden truths, then you can’t limit yourself to the narrow, dogmatic view of the Bible. We need to experiment. We need to experience each other on a deeper level and let ourselves experience other religions. This is for sophisticated Christians, not simple ones.” This is what all false gods do. They offer you something, and they take and take from you and never give what they promise. The gods of the ancients promised fertility and wealth and happiness, but took more and more and more and left everyone crushed. The gods of this age do the same. The false man-made god of the Freemasons and many American churches may seem tolerant and open, but preach a similar message- if you want to be saved, you must be good, moral, tolerant, and generous. That’s slavery- how do you know when you’ve done enough to be truly good enough? You don’t, and you will go to your grave wondering if you did enough. Good luck. The god of money promises that if you earn enough, you’ll be enough. The god of physical attractiveness promises if you lift enough, are thin enough, you’ll be enough. The god of approval promises that if enough people like and approve of you, then you’ll finally be worthy,

and they all enslave you. That is why Jesus is so strict about this. Idolatry, worshiping, dedicating yourself, slaving away to false god doesn't just rob Jesus of his glory, it robs you of comfort and joy that Jesus desperately wants you to have. Look at what Jesus says about the Jezebel woman! He gave her time to repent! He actually tolerated her because he wanted to give her a chance to stop and repent and he would gladly forgive her! And look at what he says about her followers- even though they dishonored him and spat in his face by what they did- he would forgive them if they repented! Even in his wrath and vengeance, Jesus is loving and kind because he is such a different God. While every other god demands your service and slavery, Jesus made himself your servant, he made himself small, he made himself mortal, he made himself unworthy, he let himself be tortured, killed, ugly- so you and I could beautiful- perfect, innocent in God's eyes and not just float around in Heaven, but sit with him on this throne of glory ruling at side in the New Heavens and the New Earth. That is what Jesus offers to his people- all for free. Glory, honor, joy, you will be so beautiful and perfect that if you saw your future self now, you'd faint. But you must understand, because of what Jesus has done on the cross, that's how he sees you now. Therefore, if you want to grow and become happier and more fulfilled, don't chase other gods. Learn to see yourself as Jesus sees you. Learn to see yourself as Jesus sees you, and you, like the Christians in Thyatira, like Godfrey, will not be shaken or enslaved by anyone lesser than the glorious Morning Star, the perfect, mighty, forgiving, strict about grace, tolerant of sinners, Son of God. Amen.