Revelation 2:18-29

Compromise Is Not An Option

1. Faithfulness commended, but compromise condemned
2. Prescription dispensed--let go and hold on

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"To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets,...only hold on to what you have until I come.

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations--'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery'--just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (NIV)

There are areas in which compromise is not only an art, but also an absolutely necessary skill. For instance, marriage. No compromise, no marriage, at least not for long. However, compromise is not a trait I'd like to see in my doctor. Just imagine: "You know, technically the treatment for this requires that you take these pills 3 times a day. But that’s going to make you awfully nauseous. Why don’t you just take the pills once a day and see if that works?” Or, "Why don’t we just wait and see if the cancer recedes on its own before we try surgery?” No way! Attack the problems! Get them out of my body, do whatever it takes, and do it now! Compromise is not an option!

Just as we would not view compromise as an option with our physical health, Jesus does not view it as an option with our spiritual health--both as individuals and as a congregation. In his letter to the Christians at Thyatira, Jesus states in no uncertain terms that when it comes to our Christian faith and life, COMPROMISE IS NOT AN OPTION!

1. Faithfulness commended, but compromise condemned

Jesus begins with a word of commendation, words of praise: "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." This was a hard-working church, a church that was doing more than it did at first—a church that was not content to rest on its laurels!

I haven’t been at Peace long enough to say whether or not Peace is doing more than it has done in the past. From what I hear, Peace’s past is a pretty active and ambitious one. But I think I can say that if Jesus were to speak directly to Peace Lutheran Church today, he would be able to make positive reference to our “deeds”, our “love and faith”, and our “service and perseverance.”

He might specifically make reference to the fact that next year’s proposed budget allocates $50,000 for our work as a synod and the work of Arizona Lutheran Academy—and the fact that those numbers are in keeping with Peace’s past support of those areas of ministry.
Or he might make reference to the deeds of love and faith that are carried out, for the most part, silently by the individuals who are the members of Peace—cards of encouragement sent, meals cooked and delivered, prayers of intercession offered. As I said, these things are done so silently that many of us are unaware of them, but they speak loudly to the glory of our Savior, and our Savior loudly speaks words of commendation such as are found in this morning’s reading.

But before we equate faithfulness merely with balanced budgets or good Bible class attendance or sparkling facilities, let’s remember the next words that Jesus spoke. We read, "the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze," says, "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols." Jezebel was probably not her real name, but Jesus called her this to link her to the Jezebel of the Old Testament. A foreigner who married King Ahab, Jezebel was the woman who introduced Baal worship with its sexual immorality into the northern kingdom of Israel.

The church at Thyatira had its own Jezebel. She had apparently turned Christian freedom into a license to sin, especially when it came to sexual practices. (By the way, are you noticing how many of the 7 letters warn against sexual sins? There’s certainly a warning also for us in this area of life.) The way in which she probably justified this lifestyle is found in the fact that she called herself a prophetess and spoke of "so-called deep secrets." She claimed to have a higher wisdom—as if the message of the cross were not enough to cling to, as if she and her followers were too sophisticated to worry about living simple, God-fearing, decent lives. She claimed to have a more "enlightened" way of viewing things and was encouraging others to do the same.

But what Jesus apparently finds most tragic about this situation is not that Jezebel was attempting to spread her false teachings. No, the first thing Jesus mentions is his displeasure that the other members of the congregation were letting her do it (or, to use Jesus’ word, "tolerating" her.)

If this whole situation sounds depressingly familiar, it’s because the letter we looked at a few weeks ago—the letter to the congregation at Pergamum, a congregation that was only 20 miles away from Thyatira—exposed some of the same problems. It spoke about sexual sin within a congregation, together with a reluctance to speak out on the part of those who knew better.

For the second straight letter we see a congregation failing to deal truthfully and forcefully with the false doctrine or false living of some of its members. Again, an item that arises in multiple letters in Revelation is one about which we need to take serious warning, lest we fall into compromise like the church at Thyatira did.

And by compromising, they were showing a callous disregard for Jezebel’s soul. They were not acting in accordance with the words of James, who wrote, "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins." (5:19,20) By failing to speak out, instead of saving Jezebel from death, they were actually becoming responsible for the death of her soul.

That is the first reason Jesus warns them—because they were failing to show concern for the soul of another human being. But there is another reason that Jesus warned them.

Alexander Pope wrote, "Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, As to be hated needs but to be seen; Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face, We first endure, then pity, then embrace."

Alexander Pope knew the natural progression of things—first we see evil and are repulsed by it, but eventually we will put up with it, make an effort to understand it and explain it, and eventually we will embrace it ourselves.
Jesus warned the Christians at Thyatira because he knew that eventually this would happen to them, that eventually this sort of tolerance would infect the entire congregation. And how easily that sort of thinking, that sort of "non-accepting acceptance"—in which we officially state our disapproval, but then indicate approval by our actions—or lack of them—how easily that sort of thinking bleeds over into our own lives, doesn’t it? How easily our stated disapproval turns into neutrality turns into acceptance and even promotion!

You don’t believe it? What TV shows and movies have you been watching lately? What is your official stand on them? If Jesus had been sitting there watching with you, would you have said that you approved of them? And yet what did your actions indicate?

What are the pictures and thoughts that play on the canvas of your mind? Officially, where do you stand on such things? And where do you stand in reality? Where did you stand on such things five years ago? Has your stand changed? Is your life reflecting growing compromise with the world, or a strong stand against evil?

Compromise cannot be an option. James indicated as much when he said, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). We would do well to heed the words of Paul to Timothy. "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4:16). We do well to keep a close eye on which direction we are drifting, on whether our familiarity with evil is leading to acceptance and even embracing of it.

If we don’t, we run the very real risk of having Jesus act towards us as he promises to do towards Jezebel. Jesus says, "I will cast her on a bed of suffering. And I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead." Whether or not "her children" refers to her offspring or her followers is unclear, but this much is clear—all those associated with her would suffer because of her immorality. Who says God doesn't hate and punish sin?

Indeed, God must do so. He must do so because he is a just God, and he also must do so in order to defend his reputation. He says, "All the churches will know that I am the one who searches the hearts and minds." God will not have his commandments trampled upon, and he will not be played for a fool. Eventually he will make it clear to all that he "searches hearts"—that he sees sin. For those who have sinned, what fearful words these next words are—"and I will give to each one of you according to your works." Considering that you and I have not only tolerated the Jezebel’s of this world, but at times even accepted and embraced her ways, the thought of being repaid "according to our works" is a frightening one indeed.

2. Prescription dispensed—"let go and hold on"

What course of action does Jesus prescribe for the church at Thyatira, for us? He tells us to "let go" and then to "hold on." Although God pronounces judgment on those who follow Jezebel, he offers some hope for us, doesn’t he? For he says that he will do those things "unless they repent." To repent is to confess those actions for what they were—sin—and then to let go of them. That is, to make a break with those things, to not cling to them as something we cherish, but rather to let go of them as we might let go of a dangerously hot kettle or a disgustingly smelly bag of garbage.

Where is that spot where you have made your peace, in what areas have you compromised with the Jezebels of this world—yes, with the Devil himself? Whatever false teaching, whatever false living you have grabbed onto, Jesus says to let go of it. Repent. Whatever disease it is that threatens your soul, don’t compromise with it and hope it doesn’t do too much damage. Drop it and walk away, never looking back. Let go.

And then hold on. Jesus says, "Hold on to what you have until I come." It’s the same sort of thing that Jesus said to the Christians at Smyrna, when he encouraged them in the midst of their struggles, "Be faithful, even to the point of death..." (Revelation 2:10)
To what were the Christians at Thyatira to hold on? They were to hold on to the gospel. They were to hold onto the good news of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus’ uncompromising suffering, death, and resurrection.

Thanks be to God that Jesus did not compromise when it came to paying for our sins! Praise God that he did not tell Jesus to "make a payment for the ‘big sins’ and let the ‘little sins’ go." Knowing that even one unpaid sin would have been enough to send us to Hell, praise Jesus that he made full atonement, full payment for our sins. Praise God that Jesus did not say, "I think that God will be satisfied if I just pay for the sins of certain people. I mean, it’s just not worth it to me to pay for everyone." If that were the case, what would we be able to hold onto? A hope that we might be one of those for whom Jesus died? But the Bible repeatedly states that Jesus refused to compromise, that he was the atoning sacrifice “for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:1)

Yes, even for our sins—even for our many sins of compromise with the world. Hold onto that and don’t let go of it—even in the face of what Jesus’ refers to as "Satan’s so-called deep secrets." Such secrets present themselves as weighty philosophy, but in the end they amount only to the question that Satan asked Eve in the Garden of Eden: "Did God really say..." (Genesis 3:1). For the Christians at Thyatira, that question took the form of, “Did God really say that sex is only for husband and wife?” For us it might take the form of "Did God really say, ‘Whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’"

And when we have repented of and let go of such thinking, Satan will attempt to come to us with another "deep secret." He will say, "Did God really say, ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved’? What about your sins?" When the Jezebels who work for Satan try to make us believe that Jesus is not enough, hold onto his gospel. Hold onto his promises. Jesus makes us some final promises in the closing words of our reading. He says, "To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations...just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star." Elsewhere in Revelation, Jesus refers to himself as "the Morning Star." Jesus tells us to hold on to what we have until he comes, and here he promises that when he does come, he will give us himself, he will give us Heaven, and he will even give us the authority to rule with him.

Until he comes again to take us to rule with him, do not compromise! Uncompromisingly speak out against and let go of sin, and uncompromisingly hold onto Jesus as the one and only and certain way of salvation. Amen.