

"WHICH KINGDOM FOR YOU?"
by Rom A. Pegram (3/19/17)

I want to tell you something about our society, today, that I think you'll agree has a ring of truth to it. What I want to talk with you about is the phenomena of 'tolerance.' Tolerance is a production concept that helped make this country famous. In the mid-1800s, Europeans criticized American craftsmanship for being second-rate. What were they talking about? *Tolerance*. We had come to realize, however, that what we manufactured only had to be good enough to work. We thought the extra touches that went into European products to make them perfect were really excessive. For example, a clock, a gun, or a lock only needed to function well. It didn't matter if it had curlicues or if all of its rough edges were smoothed down. Did the clock keep time? Did the gun shoot straight? Would the lock keep out unwanted intruders? *These were the questions that needed to be answered...*

Tolerance prompted us to ask, "If the ball bearings don't have to be perfect, how much error *can* be tolerated? How much variance can we get by with?" The truth of the matter is that back in the 1800s, American-manufactured products were made just *good enough* for their purpose. And by the 20th century, with increased automation, manufacturers were tolerating even larger variances—as long as products met *minimum* standards. By then, we'd become comfortable with tolerance, and it obviously worked ... or did it?

Folks, we've come to the point, today, that a *lack of* tolerance is not a virtue admired in America. We're used to it. We expect a little bit of it in every part of our lives. This is also one reason *many* in our society have a problem with God today. You see, God is just a little less tolerant in spiritual matters than we'd like him to be! Am I right? *Tolerance*—the whole idea of tolerance—is a Western phenomenon, one we've grown accustomed to. And Christianity, folks, true Christianity ... flies right smack in the face of it! Listen to our scripture lesson for today (1 John 1:5-2:6, NLT)...

This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. ⁶ So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. ⁷ But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. ⁹ But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.

My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. ² He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not

only our sins but the sins of all the world. ³ And we can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments. ⁴ If someone claims, "I know God," but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. ⁵ But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. ⁶ Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did.

One thing John will never be accused of is being *soft* when it comes to our spiritual lives. Isn't that the truth? What John knows very clearly is this: *everyone needs Jesus!* And, when we come to realize his presence in our lives, *it makes a difference!* What John knows very clearly is this: ***When we practice the presence of Christ, we begin to embrace righteousness and denounce evil in our lives!*** Seeing the 'Unseen Christ' can be *that* powerful! We'll realize beyond a doubt ... our need for Christ ... and as we recognize his presence in our lives, we'll begin to embrace all that's Christ-like! So:

- Who is this God that goes against the '*tolerance grain*' of our society?
- Who is this God that challenges what we, as Westerners, have come to know as truth—something that works for us?

I'm glad you asked. The first thing *John wants us to know* today is this: **HERE'S WHAT GOD IS LIKE (V. 5)**. Verse 5 tells us, "Now the message that we have heard from his Son and announce is this: God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him." That statement is a bit hard for some of us to swallow; we tend to feel *a little sin ought to be tolerated* ... don't we? I mean, if a person is doing good 85 to 90 percent of the time, *certainly* God can be tolerant of the other 10 or 15 percent! Folks, we've been talking about Jesus being present here in our worship services for the past couple weeks ... so, what do you think Jesus would say if we asked *him* about this today?

If Jesus would say that it's O.K. to let 10 to 15 percent slide, then he would be contradicting much of what God's word tells us elsewhere. What about the truth of Ephesians 6, where Paul talks about 'putting on the armor of God'? Why would Paul say to do that? 'Because God doesn't really care if we're attacked by sin a certain percentage of the time? NO, because God wants us to be protected from the sin God knows will cause nothing but hardship and heartache in our lives! Ephesians 6 is about *putting on the full armor of God in order to be protected against the shots the devil wants to take at us*, as followers of Christ. Think about this scripture and *why* Paul would tell us about this so emphatically!

A simple truth to learn early on in your Christian walk is this: ***When sin is tolerated in a life, the presence of Christ seems to fade.*** Why is that? It's because God and sin just don't mix—kind of like *oil & water*; they just cannot co-exist. And if you think they do, you desperately need to take another trip to Calvary—to see Jesus on the cross! There you'll see how much God hates sin ... but loves the sinner. So, who is this God we serve? *One who loves us so much that he won't tolerate sin in the lives of those who*

are his, because he's holy and desires for us the same ... and, practically speaking, because he knows what's best for us! The second thing John wants us to see is, not only what God is like, but also...

HERE'S WHAT WE CAN BE LIKE (VV. 6-10). Verse 6 talks about the hypocrite, doesn't it? If we claim to know Christ, yet live lives that don't reflect that, we're full of *hypocrisy!* Verse 7, in contrast, talks about *the possibilities* when we live what we say we believe! In God there is no darkness at all! So, what does Jesus expect of us? The same...

Folks, as a pastor, what breaks my heart more than anything else is ... when people claim to follow Christ, can choose to either live like or not ... and they choose, almost deliberately, to NOT live in the light! Why would they do that? Because it's our choice how we choose to live (FREE WILL). *It's our choice which kingdom we choose to live in—the Kingdom of Darkness or the Kingdom of Light.* But, folks, you must know this: *God does not live in the Kingdom of Darkness.* In fact, 'there is no darkness at all in him,' according to John...

One of the ways I keep up with trends in our world today—especially as they affect spiritual leadership in the Church—is to read everything I can by George Barna. The Barna Group Ltd. is an organization that is constantly polling our populace to see what they believe, why, etc. In a recent article by Barna, he shared a study they did regarding American's top priorities in their life. But, after the study was completed, it was obvious that something was amiss...

Barna stated, "...the relationship between people's perception of their religious commitment and their reticence to make faith their top priority points to a significant disconnect." He went on to say, "Spirituality is in vogue in our society today. It is popular to claim to be part of a 'faith community' or to have a spiritual commitment. But what do Americans mean when they claim to be 'spiritual?'" Barna gave this illustration. "The recent Grammy awards were perhaps indicative of this breakdown between self-perception and reality. The members of the group that won the award for best song thanked God for the victory, then immediately followed with profanities that had to be bleeped from the broadcast. **It seems as if God is in, but living for God is not.**"

Verse 5b says, "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all." So, what's up with the Grammy behavior? Even more importantly, what's up with us when we claim Christ on Sundays ... then—according to our behavior—we forget about him until the next Sunday? The GOOD NEWS is that vv. 6-10 show us what we *can* be like, if we'll choose the Kingdom of Light and follow Christ! *We, too, can live in the light!*
Remember: IN GOD THERE IS NO DARKNESS! And *God expects the same from us!*

Now, don't take **Verse 8** *out of context* whatever you do! Some people look at this verse and use that as an excuse to sin; they like to say 'everyone sins,' regardless. But, is that

what John means here? NO! Absolutely not! What the Apostle John is talking about in this verse are those who are *non-repentant*—those who refuse to admit sin exists in their lives (v. 9 explains this when it says, "But, if we confess our sins"). God doesn't have much tolerance for those who are—for whatever reason—*unwilling* to even admit that there's sin in their lives! John would agree with our scripture—Jesus' words from last week—that say to 'be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.' *The place in our lives we can be made perfect is in our love*; we can be perfect in our *intentions* toward God & others. And, God expects us to be all we can be, with his help, motivated by love to live in the Kingdom of Light! So, where does this leave us? John goes on to tell us...

HERE'S THE WAY WE CAN LIVE IT (VV. 1-6). How can we live in the Kingdom of Light? Live a life of perfect intention; be intentional to do all you can to *not* let sin consume your life ... or run your life!

But, John is *not unrealistic* here; he says that *if* you do sin, let it be the exception, not the rule, then ask for forgiveness. In other words, don't live like those who've chosen the Kingdom of Darkness, pretending sin doesn't exist! God has made a way—through Jesus—to cover the sin that might creep into our lives ... but we have to ask for it; IT'S OUR CHOICE! How can we deliberately choose to live in the Kingdom of Light? **Decide to live a life obedient to all God's called us to!** Specifically, decide to live a life that's Christ-like in all you do! OBEDIENCE is the ultimate key! Is our life reflecting who we claim to be?

I'll never forget something that happened when I was in high school in La Farge, Wisconsin—that happened to one of my very best friends. His family farmed outside of town ... and they lived in the old farmhouse. One day, they discovered a mother skunk had nested under the old farmhouse and had had a litter of little skunks. So, they had to move them out of there ... to a new nesting spot. It wasn't an easy thing to do. Because of this, my friend Joe came to school for several days smelling of skunk. I felt bad for him and will never forget that traumatic time in *his* life (what affects your friends affects you). Folks, it was so traumatic, he vowed it would never happen to him ever again—as long as he lived!

Let me ask you a question, today: *What would you think of a person who, after being sprayed by a skunk once, allowed it to happen again ... and again ... and again?* And in time, they'd come to say, "Oh, the smell isn't so bad ... once you get used to it, is it?" ... Oswald Chambers says, "One of the penalties of sin is our acceptance of it. It is not only God who punishes for sin, but sin establishes itself in the sinner and takes its toll. ...the penalty of sin is that you gradually get used to it, until you finally come to the place where you no longer even realize that it is sin." I sense Jesus might say the same of those who don't care about (or don't know how to reverse) the sin that exists in their lives. Folks, something is seriously wrong if anyone gets used to the smell of skunk! That's what the skunk and sin have in common; they both stink, but sin will stink forever!

Folks, we are God's people—followers of Christ. Can you see him today? Can you see the look on his face? What does his look say ... to you? The choice we have is a serious one. The choice we have is an eternal one ... and the choice is ours. Which Kingdom for you?