

JESUS AND TOLERANCE

Will Rogers was known for his laughter, but he also knew how to weep. One day he was entertaining at a hospital in Los Angeles that specialized in rehabilitating polio victims and people with other extreme physical handicaps. Of course, Rogers had everybody laughing, even patients in really bad condition; but then he suddenly left the platform and went to the rest room. One of the other entertainers followed him to give him a towel; and when he opened the door, he saw Will Rogers leaning against the wall, sobbing like a child. He closed the door, and in a few minutes, Rogers appeared back on the platform, a smile on his face and as jovial as before.

Today we are concluding our series Walking with Jesus. Someone once said, if you want to learn what a person is really like, ask three questions: What makes him laugh? What makes him weep? What makes him angry?

Last week we talked about what made Jesus weep. Today I want to talk about what makes Jesus angry. The kind of anger that Moses displayed when he broke the two tablets of the law and then climbed the mountain to intercede for his people. The kind of anger that Jesus displayed when He cleansed the temple and then wept over the city.

John 2:13-19 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 15 So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" 17 His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

Why was Jesus angry? In itself, there was nothing wrong with the sale of cattle, sheep and doves. These animals were sold as part of the sacrificial system given by God through Moses to the nation of Israel. People who lived a great distance from Israel would take their sacrifices and offerings and convert them to money which was easier to carry. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they would use the money to buy sacrifices and offerings to present at the temple. The only currency which was accepted was the temple shekel. Money changers converted the foreign currencies from around the Roman Empire into the shekel. It was all designed to help people. So, what was it that Jesus objected to?

Today I want to talk about a word that we hear spoken all the time – tolerance.

1. What Tolerance Is

Tolerance is the understanding that all people are created in the image of God and therefore have value, worth and dignity. Tolerance begins by recognizing that, although we may disagree on worldview or how we see things, that we treat each other with grace and dignity.

Tolerance does not mean that there is no such thing as absolute truth. It does not mean that we have to accept every point of view as equal. It does not mean that we should never judge people. How many times have you heard somebody say that you should not judge people? If you're a Christian, somebody has certainly said it to you – you ought not to judge.

When somebody says to you that you ought not judge you should respond by saying, why are you judging me for judging? That is judgment. Notice that “Don’t judge,” is a self-defeating statement.

What’s a self-defeating statement? A self-defeating statement is like saying I can’t speak a word in English. Or my brother is an only child. Or everything I say is a lie. (Some of you will get that tomorrow!) Relativism is self-defeating. When people say you ought not judge, they’re making a judgment. When people say there are no absolutes. You should ask them, are you absolutely sure about that? When people say there is no truth, you ought to ask them, is that true? Is it true that there is no truth? As soon as you say there is no truth you are saying that what you have just said is not true, so you are actually saying that there is truth. That is because the statement is self defeating. It doesn’t meet its own standard. You ought not to make judgments is actually a judgment.

Jesus did not say that we should never judge. In the Sermon on the Mount, He does say ‘do not judge’, but he says more than that. When you are reading the Bible, context is important.

Matthew 7:1-5 Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 3 Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Is Jesus telling us here never to judge? No. He is telling us that we *should* help take the speck out of our brother’s eye. That involves making a judgment. He is simply saying that you cannot do that without first dealing with your own problems. Then you can better help your brother.

So, this is not a command *not* to judge. It is a command on *how* to judge. In other words, don’t judge hypocritically. There must be grace. If you have a problem deal with it before you try to help others. Like the oxygen masks on an airplane, get yours on before you help your kids with theirs.

Life is based on judgements. All day every day we are making judgements between right and wrong, good and evil, safe choices from dangerous choices. We all make judgments. The question isn’t whether or not you can make judgments. The question is, are your judgments true?

John 7:24 Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

Jesus gave a very stern rebuke for the religious elite of His day. He went after the Pharisees who were the religious and political leaders of Israel. How many times have you heard somebody say, “That person is such a saint, he’s never said a bad word about anyone?”

Matthew 23:27 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.

Sweet and gentle Jesus said that? Yes. Jesus was not a push over! He spoke the truth. He did not sugar coat things. He was not Mr. Rogers. He was loving and kind but he did not tolerate sin.

In this story, Jesus judges the motives of the people who were in the temple courts. It was not what they were doing but why and how they were doing it that Jesus objects to.

Jesus was tough. He told people the truth. He loved people enough to tell them the truth. Likewise, we have to tell people the truth. That means that sometimes we have to be direct. We have to speak the truth in love.

There was a German pastor during the Second World War who failed to cry out against the atrocities of Adolf Hitler. He later became a victim of a Nazi Concentration camp. He issued a warning that we must heed today about Christian responsibility in the face of an ungodly government. He stated: "In Germany, they first came for the Jews, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew; then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. And then they came for me...and by that time there was no one left to speak up." We have to speak out against injustice. We have to understand what true tolerance is.

2. Why Tolerance Is Not Enough

We need to understand what tolerance is, and what it is not. Are we as Christians commanded to be tolerant? No, we are not. We are commanded to be much more. We are commanded to be loving. Tolerance is too weak. Tolerance says hold your nose and put up with them. Love says reach out and help them. Tolerance is passive. Love is active. Tolerance says stop caring, stop loving, just put up with them but leave me alone. Tolerance is just the cheap counterfeit of Christian love.

Love says let me reach out and help you. Let me be active. Let me be salt and light. I'm going to do whatever I can to help you because I love you. That might mean I'm not going to tolerate the evil that you want to do.

In fact, we know this as parents. We don't tolerate everything our kids do, do we? If we did, that would not be wise or loving. It would be wrong. In fact, tolerance in the face of evil is an evil itself. If you tolerate evil, you're being unloving. So, we're called to a higher standard. We're not called to be tolerant; we're called to be loving.

We need to be easy on people and hard on sin. That's what Jesus was. He was easy on people but he was hard on their sin. We need to be the same way. In fact, to sum it up love means seeking what is good and right for people. Good parents want what is best for their children, and they hate things that hurt them. God loves us, which is why he is intolerant of sinful behavior. It hurts us.

The problem is that today we are calling good evil and evil good.

Isaiah 5:20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

In this story we read, Jesus was intolerant. He was intolerant of several things that were happening.

First, he was intolerant of thievery. He was intolerant of people who were taking advantage of other people. The priests were taking money. They got a cut from the money changers. They turned this into a total marketplace. It was more about money than it was about people. The problem is money is temporal – people are eternal. The focus needs to be on people not money.

Today we have televangelists who stand up and say 'Send me a thousand dollars and you'll be blessed!' You will be healthy and wealthy. This is called the prosperity gospel and it is nonsense.

The apostles and Jesus were not healthy and wealthy, and they had faith. They got beaten, tortured and killed for being Christians and we think if we send some tell evangelist a thousand dollars, we're not going to get that? There are blessings that flow from obedience, but those blessings are not always material - wealth and health.

Second, Jesus was intolerant of disrupting worship. In the story, these people were disrupting worship right there in the temple. What is the greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. Our number one priority is worship. Therefore, the number one priority for those at the temple should be to provide an atmosphere of worship.

The problem was that in the temple there wasn't any silence. There were animals all over the place and people talking. Imagine if we had that here right now in this service. I am trying to say something and you have animals yelling and people talking. It would be disruptive.

Third, Jesus was intolerant of hypocrisy. The people who worked in the temple were using inaccurate scales. It looked like they were given you a fair deal but in reality, they were cheating you. Hypocrisy is not merely saying one thing and doing another. We all do that, it's called failure. All of us admit that we fail from time to time. Hypocrisy means that even though you fail, you act as if you don't. You put on a self-righteous mask and we just think we're so much better than everyone else.

I saw a debate between an atheist and a Christian. The atheist said that he did not believe in religion because of all the evil things Christians have done through the ages. The Christian started by asking what he meant by evil. If atheism is true and God does not exist then there is really no such thing as evil. Evil can only exist when there is first good. In order for something to be right there has to be a standard of right and wrong beyond humanity – an unchangeable authoritative moral standard. That's what we would call God. Therefore, the moment you say that something is evil you prove God's existence, as someone once said 'you have to sit in God's lap to slap his face! Shadows prove the existence of sunshine. You can have sunshine without shadows, but you cannot have shadows without sunshine. Likewise, you can have good without evil, but you cannot have evil without good.

After that, the Christian said that yes, many terrible things have been done in the name of religion. Jesus presents a standard of living that all of us have fallen short of. But does my inability to reach a standard mean that the standard is wrong? No, it shows that the standard is necessary. I can't live up to what the bible says. If I could, I wouldn't need a savior. If we were perfect, we would not need Jesus, but the fact that there is evil in the world shows us the bible is true and that God does exist and that we all need a saviour.

Fourth, Jesus was intolerant of leading people astray. The actions of the people in the temple were bad and they were leaving a bad taste in people's mouth. As an ambassador, you represent the country that sends you. People dreaded going to the temple because of the actions of these people. Their actions were influencing how people saw God. People's faith was being ruined by their actions. Jesus had strong words to say about people who led others astray, especially young people.

Mark 9:42 And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.

So many young people walk away from the church because of what they run into in university and college. They go off to college and they run into professors who are five times more likely to be atheists than the general public.

I heard about one Christian speaker that spoke at a university in the states. He said to the students “You mind if I ask you a question? If right now I could prove to you that Christianity were true, would you become a Christian?” The students all yelled back NO! How is that reasonable or rational? It’s not. The problem is, they don’t want it to be true. Many people out there don’t want Christianity to be true. You could spend all day giving them evidence, giving them testimonies and all that. They’re just going to come up with another objection. They are not open to truth.

Jesus was intolerant of sin, because He understood how sin hurts us. Tolerance is a weak imitation of love. It implies that your heart can still throb with hate for someone, but as long as you don’t say anything out loud, and as long as you tolerate that person’s presence and veil your contempt, that’s cool. Tolerance implies utter detachment from the wellbeing of those around you, and total disregard for their well-being.

Years ago, our daughter Amanda went on a missions trip to Fiji and New Zealand. Just before she came home, she was bit by a spider. The bite formed an ulcer and became very infected. It was a very dangerous thing. When infection gets into a wound it spreads. Tiny microbes that can’t even be seen by the human eye can kill you! The first thing that had to be done was to clean out the wound. The second thing that had to be done was to protect the wound from further infection. That meant zero tolerance for anything that might touch it. As a parent I was intolerant of anything that might further infect that wound. Like a surgeon scrubbing for an operation. That is how God sees sin. He has zero tolerance for things that might hurt us and lead us away and send us to hell.

3. Where Tolerance Leads

So why are so many people talking about tolerance today? Society says that tolerance is important because we need to accept people who have different opinions than you. There is truth in that. Yes, we need to accept people. Yes, we need to treat others with dignity and respect. However, that does not mean that all ideas and beliefs have equal value.

To tolerate a religious viewpoint that is contrary to your own does not mean that you have to accept it as fact. The very meaning of the word tolerance implies that you have differing beliefs, but that you respect each other as individuals. Tolerance is not really the issue. What the world is seeking is not tolerance but pluralism. That is where the modern idea of tolerance leads. Pluralism requires that you accept other religious teachings as legitimate expressions of faith. It means that all religions are the same. This is the idea behind the whole Coexist movement.

So what is wrong with that? You can only say all religions are the same if all religions are wrong, and that is where tolerance leads. The goal is to remove religion entirely.

C.H. Spurgeon once said “You cannot have unity with the world without compromising the truth. To forsake truth for the sake of unity is to betray Jesus Christ.”

In this story, Jesus acted with authority to drive out those who were cheating and hurting the people. The real question is not “why did Jesus do it”, the real question is “why had no one else already done it?” Why had the people tolerated this kind of injustice for so long? The simple answer is that the probably thought that there was nothing they could do about it. That is just the way things were, so why rock the boat.

When Jesus acted, he was immediately challenged. Those in authority asked "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" In other words, they were asking him why he thought that he was above the law, who did he think he was to come in and try to change the system. They were intolerant of his intolerance.

When Jesus was challenged on what authority He had to do these things He responds saying;

John 2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

What was Jesus saying? Only the owner of a building has the authority to decide who lives in it and what is done with it. If you rent a house, you can't just decide that you want to punch a hole through a wall. You cannot do that because the house does not belong to you.

Who gets to decide what is done in the temple? It was created as a dwelling place for God. It was God's house, therefore only God gets to decide what is done in it. When asked about authority Jesus declares that He is God incarnate, and that would be proven when He would raise from the dead after 3 days. He had the authority to say what happened in the temple because it belonged to him.

People today are saying "who says that marriage has to be the union of a man and woman?" God says, and because He is the one who created it, he gets the final say in how we get to define it.

People today are saying "who says the sex is only for marriage?" God says, and because He created it, He gets the final say in what we do with it.

So many Jews in the days of Jesus went in and out of the temple. They were aware of the injustice but did nothing to stop it. As Christians we are called to be agents of change in this world. We can not put up with injustice. We cannot tolerate sin but must speak out against it.

Tolerance and apathy are the last virtues of a dying society - Aristotle

We see so much evil happening around us every day. If we do not speak up against it, who will?