

Series: Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and the Inquiring Skeptics

Sermon: Is Tolerance a Virtue or a Vice?

Scripture: Luke 9:49-62

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Today is the fourth in a series of nine messages on Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics. Today I want to ask the question, “Is Tolerance a Virtue or a Vice?” And I want to answer my own question with a firm, unequivocal, “It depends.” I have here a magazine whose cover asks the question, “Why are Christians So Intolerant?” I believe that’s a legitimate question, because there are many people who need the Lord but may never respond to the Lord we are presenting if we do not get a handle on the biblical virtue of Tolerance. At the same time I recognize that this virtue can very quickly become a vice when we tolerate things God would never accept.

Thus I like to call Tolerance “the dangerous virtue.” One doesn’t normally think of virtues as being dangerous. But probably any virtue we think of—love, patience, peace, honesty (ever hear the term “brutal honesty”?), you name it—can become dangerous if taken too far, applied in the wrong way, or employed with the wrong motive. I think that is especially true of the virtue of tolerance.

Tolerance is a rather hard trait to get a handle on. If I were to ask you to raise your hand if you are a tolerant individual, I would imagine nearly every hand would go up. The reason for this is that we tend to rate ourselves by comparison to others and to attach labels other than “tolerant” to those who are different from us. For example, assuming you think of yourself as “tolerant,” those who are more tolerant than you are labeled as “liberal” or “wishy-washy compromisers,” while those less tolerant are “bigoted” or “nitpickers.”

Yet that hardly seems fair, or at least it hardly seems meaningful. There must be some firmer standard of tolerance than that to go by. And I think there is. True biblical tolerance is the subject of two passages I want us to consider this morning—one from the OT and the other from the NT. First, I want us to read from Numbers 11:16-30, where the children of Israel are wailing about having nothing but manna to eat and wanting to return to slavery in Egypt. Moses is about to despair of his responsibility to lead the people.

The LORD said to Moses: “Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

“Tell the people: ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The LORD heard you when you wailed, “If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!” Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one

day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month--until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it--because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"

But Moses said, "Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!' Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?"

The LORD answered Moses, "Is the Lord's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you."

So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders.

When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again.

However, two men, (and this is where the tolerance issue arises) whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the Tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!"

But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp."

Now please turn to Luke 9:46-50:

"An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them,

"Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all--he is the greatest."

"Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him;

but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.

Leave your Bible open to this passage because we're going to come back to it shortly.

I believe these two passages teach us that we should be tolerant toward other believers, and tolerant toward non-believers. Since I don't have time to expound both texts, I'm going to camp on the passage from Luke and just refer back to the Numbers text for illustration. So let's start with what Jesus teaches in Luke 9 about tolerance.

Tolerance should characterize the Christian disciple's attitude toward other believers. (49-50)

John seeks approval for his courageous "defense of the faith." An interesting thing seems to be going on as this passage opens up. Does John just bring up the subject of the strange exorcist out of the clear blue? I think not. Look back at verse 46: "An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest." It's ironic that such an argument should take place when John and two of the other disciples have just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration, where they have been privileged to see an extraordinary glimpse of the glory of Jesus Christ.

Though they are smart enough not to conduct their argument right in front of Jesus, He knows their thoughts, and taking a little child He says to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest." Jesus uses the child to teach them that greatness in the Kingdom is not measured as it is here on earth; it's not the rich and the powerful and the influential and the intellectual who are great—it's those who reach out to the least of these.

Then immediately we read these words, "'Master,' said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.'" Do you see the connection? Do you see it? No, you don't see it because there is no connection, at least as far as I can tell. John is trying to change the subject. He's been caught red-handed, arguing about greatness while Jesus is talking about servanthood, and now the only way to save face is to change the subject as fast as he can.

Suddenly He remembers something he did the other day that he had forgotten to brag about. What a perfect time to bring it up! "Jesus, we tried to stop a freelance exorcist. What do you think of that?" Jesus responds, "OK, John, you want to talk about this other topic? Fine, let's talk about it. You blew it. You screwed up royally when you tried to stop this man."

Jesus censures John for his intolerance. John believes that what he has done is to defend the faith against outsiders. But in point of fact he has only defended his own ego. If we were to read between the lines, here is what John is saying about this other man: "He has no business doing

what he's doing because he isn't one of us Twelve, he didn't go to the right seminary, he doesn't go to the right church, he isn't a Five-Point Calvinist, he's not even pre-Trib." What's really ironic is that this other disciple, whoever he is, seems to *actually* be driving out demons (at least John says he is), whereas in verse 40 of this same chapter Jesus' disciples failed in their own effort to drive out a demon from a little boy. But that doesn't seem to matter to John—the guy isn't in our club so he should be silenced!

You know, this kind of exclusive, intolerant attitude is as old as the hills. Joshua demonstrated the same kind of small-minded intolerance when he tried to shut down Eldad and Medad. Moses had to rebuke him gently, “Are you jealous for my sake, Joshua? You don't have to be. I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on all of them!” There is an important hint there as to the real reason behind much of the intolerance we see between fellow-believers—jealousy and insecurity. The other person's success is perceived as a threat to our own worth and value, so we come to view him as a rival, whether he is in fact one or not. Joshua saw Eldad and Medad as a threat, but Moses didn't. He was secure enough to recognize that his authority and success depended upon God alone, and a couple of charismatics loose in the camp were not enough to menace his ministry.

I don't want to be too harsh toward Joshua. Actually there is much to admire about him here; God's truth was very dear to him and so was doing things decently and in order. But in the process he became blind to his own narrowness. He saw himself as the orthodox defender of the faith in the face of a couple of young bucks who weren't getting with the program. But in reality he was an obstructionist trying to put God in a box.

Jealousy can cause us to see many a fine, upstanding servant of the Lord as a nuisance at best and an enemy at worst. I found the following poem, which could have been written by a lot of Christians I know:

*Believe as I believe, no more, no less;
That I am right, and no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;
Look as I look, do always as I do;
And then, and only then, I'll fellowship with you.*

The jealous, insecure, intolerant person becomes suspicious, questions motives, and looks for trouble under every theological bush. We need to realize that God is big enough, and His church is big enough that we don't have to be bloodhounds on the trail of every conceivable deviation from our personal viewpoints or method of doing things. Furthermore, the needs of a lost world are so huge that we can ill afford to be fighting with one another while they go to hell.

Jesus offers a guiding principle on tolerance that deserves careful explanation and analysis.

Do you see it there in verse 50?: “Whoever is not against you is for you.” The man who is casting demons out in Jesus' name is certainly not working against Jesus, so He is to be

welcomed, not opposed. He's on the right side of the spiritual battle.

Perhaps you are more familiar with another principle Jesus offers which turns the two key elements in this principle directly around. In Luke 11:23 Jesus says, "He who is not with me is against me." Now which is it? Well, both are true; they're just two sides of the same coin. Religious liberals tend to like the Luke 9 version, while fundamentalists like Luke 11. But both come from the mouth of Jesus, and both convey the same basic truth, namely that there are only two sides in the spiritual battle.

I want to suggest a practical way to apply this principle when we are confronted by someone who claims the name of Christ but isn't part of our group. Just ask, "Whose side is he on?" I grew up in a very conservative, legalistic church atmosphere. I remember that my dad, who was a pastor and denominational leader, took a lot of grief for taking me to the Billy Graham Crusade in St. Louis in 1953. Graham was viewed very negatively in our circles, primarily because he cooperated with the mainline denominations when setting up his crusades (He would actually have a Methodist or a Presbyterian lead in prayer!). But my dad asked the Graham critics, "Whose side is Billy Graham on? Is he on Satan's side?" Frankly, a few of them thought so. Dr. Bob Jones used to forbid students at his university to pray for Graham in public.

Now be careful here, for there *are* some religious people, perhaps even some who call themselves "evangelicals," who *may be* on Satan's side, and if so we need to be courageous enough to say so. But let's not identify everyone with whom we disagree as an Enemy of the Cross.

Now in addition to Jesus' principle, I would like to offer a few other guidelines for tolerance toward other believers. Some of these are straight out of the Bible; others employ what I would call "practical wisdom."

1. You don't have to agree with every other Christian on every piddly issue. There seem to be many people in Christianity who cannot tolerate any deviation from their own views and methodology. They are black-and-white thinkers, insecure with any difference of opinion. I remember a Christian businessman here in Wichita years ago who was kind of proud of his dogmatism. He used to say, "I may be wrong, but I'm never in doubt!" But I am convinced that part of maturity, especially spiritual maturity, is being able to co-exist with disagreements and ambiguities and knowing when compromise is OK. It's absolutely essential in a church that people be willing to disagree amicably, "to agree to disagree," if you will. Another way to put it is that in the church unity is essential, but uniformity is boring. God isn't looking for all of us to think alike or look alike. No believer should be afraid to vote "no" at a church business meeting.

John Wesley, the great and godly founder of the Methodist Church offered some very good advice:

"The thing which I resolved to use every possible method of preventing was a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal. . . that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there

is any work of God but among themselves. We think and let think."ⁱ

Unfortunately the denomination which he founded, the Methodist church, has stretched Wesley's spirit of tolerance to the point he might not even recognize it today. That's once again why tolerance is a dangerous virtue. But you don't dispense with a virtue just because some misuse it. Related to that principle is another guideline, namely,

2. Neither do you have to join him. Jesus didn't say to John, "You should join forces with the man who is casting out demons in My name." He didn't even say, "You should let him join *you* in your efforts." Rather He said, "Do not *stop* him." As a pastor I am asked to join, promote, and attend a wide variety of seminars, prayer meetings, evangelistic efforts, and other religious functions. Many of them are good and worthwhile. But I don't have time for all of them. And I don't feel comfortable with some of them. God doesn't expect me to join all these efforts. (Other people may, but God doesn't). Neither, of course, does He expect me to stand up here and denounce all the ones I am not comfortable with.

3. You don't have to refrain from *all* criticism. There are times when one must call a spade and spade and when mistakes need to be pointed out in order to avoid greater problems in the future. On another occasion Wesley is reported to have said,

"I have no more right to object to a man for holding a different opinion from mine than I have to differ with a man because he wears a wig and I wear my own hair; but if he takes his wig off and shakes the powder in my face, I shall consider it my duty to get quit of him as soon as possible."

I have, over the years, criticized from the pulpit certain Christian leaders. For example, I have criticized Bill Gothard and the Ezzos (of "Growing Kids God's Way" fame) for being too legalistic, Robert Schuler for avoiding the subject of sin, Joel Osteen for his feel-good theology, and both Jimmy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart for their lack of moral integrity. But I have not felt called to try to destroy their ministries.

The Bible encourages us to speak the truth, but to speak it in love, which means that our criticism of a brother (or of anyone) should be informed and honest, and our goal should be correction, not destruction. One organization that has been the subject of some pretty harsh criticism over the past few years is Promise Keepers. A fellow-graduate of Dallas Seminary wrote a book taking PK apart limb by limb, accusing them of compromise, a watered-down Gospel, and a host of other evils. I don't know this man, but I know that his book is full of half-truths, innuendo, and distortion. I happen to think PK is an organization raised up by God to be a wake-up call to a lot of men. If I had the opportunity I would like to ask the guy who wrote that book, "What are *you* doing that is helping men to understand and keep their promises to their wives, their children, their church, their God, and their nation?"

4. Ask, "Is he preaching Jesus Christ?" This guideline comes directly from the Apostle Paul. He tells us that even someone's less-than-honorable motives should not cause us to oppose him *if* he is preaching Christ. In Philippians 1:14-18 he writes:

Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

That's really amazing. Some preachers Paul knows are ministering out of envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, hypocrisy, and apparently even attacking him while he is in prison. But Paul refuses to respond in kind. So long as they are preaching the Gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ, he will rejoice rather than seek revenge. That, friends, is a big man!

5. Don't let your tolerance extend to sin or serious false teaching. I have called tolerance the dangerous virtue because it's very easy to allow it to go too far. Somehow we desperately need to learn to distinguish between major and minor issues. Years ago several key families came to our church in St. Louis from another evangelical church in town because the church elected an Elder who didn't believe in the Deity of Christ. That's serious false teaching. There are denominations that are ordaining practicing homosexuals to the ministry. That's serious sin.

On the other hand, is it so serious if two people disagree on whether the rapture is pre-tribulational or post-tribulational, or whether we baptize infants or dedicate them, or whether the Lord's Supper is simply a memorial (the Baptist view) or involves a special presence of Christ (the Presbyterian view), or whether one thinks the gift of tongues ceased in A.D. 70 or is a gift still available in the Church today? Is anyone going to go to Heaven or Hell because of such issues? Is anyone even going to walk closer to Christ because of the position he takes on one of these issues? I doubt it. We need to learn the important truth that not all doctrines are not equal.

What we need in the Church today is people with enough courage to confront sin and heresy and apostasy, but who can distinguish between those things and mere difference of opinion. I like the balance found in a prayer that J. Sidlow Baxter wrote, "Lord, fill me with true love for all, for Roman Catholics, for Liberals, for heretics and extremists, and for all others who differ from me. But may it never be in a way which betrays the clear truths of your inspired Word, for they are the truths which alone can save them as well as me."

Now I've spent the bulk of our time on my first point, namely that Tolerance should characterize the disciple's attitude toward fellow-believers, because I believe that is where our biggest mistakes are generally made. But I do need to say a few words about our second point.

Tolerance should characterize the disciple's attitude toward *unbelievers* as well. (51-56)

Now this point may surprise us a bit. Most of us can accept that fellow believers sometimes

deserve a break and we should give them the benefit of the doubt, even if we don't always practice such. But *unbelievers*? That seems to be the message of the very next paragraph in Luke 9:

James and John propose instantaneous judgment on the Samaritans. Here's what's going on in verse 51 and following. Jesus has resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem, where he will offer His life as a sacrifice for sin. The quickest way to get to Jerusalem from where he was would be to travel through Samaria. Palestine, you see, was divided basically into three parts. There was Galilee in the north, Judea (with its capitol of Jerusalem) in the south, and Samaria was in between. There was a lot of racial hatred, however, between full-blooded Jews and the people of Samaria, who tended to be of mixed race—part Jewish and part Syrian—since they were products of the forced assimilation practiced by the Assyrians. Orthodox Jews would always cross the Jordan River, travel south, and then re-cross it again so as to avoid Samaria. Not Jesus. He loved the Samaritans and constantly sought out opportunities to minister to them.

On this particular occasion He sends messengers ahead into a Samaritan village to rent motel rooms and get some food at the local Einstein's bagelry. When the Samaritans hear, however, that this band of Galileans is headed for Jerusalem, they refuse to rent them any rooms or give them any kind of welcome at all. James and John, nicknamed appropriately "the Sons of Thunder," are incensed. They are ready to spend hard-earned shekels in that town, and these half-breed clowns are refusing to serve them. "Lord," they ask, "do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" That's a pretty serious response to being turned away at Motel 6. It's also pretty brash. They seem to assume they possess the power to do it and all they need is permission.

I'm willing to give them credit for plenty of zeal and significant devotion to Jesus. But they fail completely to understand the nature of Christian service. Unfortunately, they are not alone. It is not unusual today to see an angry Christian face on television, expressing some form of condemnation on our society at large. Some have even resorted to violence to try to stop sin. Is that our only option, as in the bombing of abortion clinics? In verse 55 it says, "Jesus turned and rebuked them."

Jesus rebukes their intolerance. His rebuke seems to be based upon three things:

1. Their intolerance is motivated by anger and revenge. You know, it's possible for us to be zealous for the honor of God in a spirit which puts us out of fellowship with God. Paul calls it "zeal without knowledge." In our loyalty to Christ, however zealous it may be, we must be constantly on our guard that we do not act with a spirit that is out of harmony with His, or follow methods of which He would not approve.

2. They are ignoring extenuating factors. The old Indian proverb seems appropriate here: "Never criticize a brother until you've walked in his moccasins two weeks." The moccasins the Samaritans were wearing were five centuries of put-downs, racism, prejudice, and bigotry from the Jewish people. The result was a great deal of hatred and antagonism. The disciples refused to

take that into consideration. Frankly, I think we American evangelicals would do well to at least try to understand a little better the plight of the Palestinians today, instead of automatically assuming that whatever Israel does is God-ordained. Someone has well said, “To understand everything is to be tolerant.”

3. Judgment is not their job. “‘Vengeance is mine,’ says the Lord, ‘I will repay.’” Revenge is not Christ’s way of dealing with rejection. There are times when we get so upset by the bizarre things that go on in our society that we feel like going and blowing someone away.ⁱⁱ We could learn a lesson from Abraham Lincoln. Criticized for being too tolerant toward his enemies, he was urged to destroy them. He responded, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”

Conclusion: I would suggest that Tolerance is of two kinds. Some are called tolerant who are indifferent to truth, who couldn’t care less, and who would as well see one set of values triumph as another. Others are called tolerant who, though cherishing certain values deeply, are prevented by wise modesty from using belligerent means to enforce those views on others.

Tolerance of the first sort makes true morality impossible. But a tolerance based on wisdom and humility gives strength of spirit and courage of conviction. It does something else—it makes a church attractive to believers and unbelievers. People can see the beauty of Jesus in our local fellowships and they will say, “I want to be a part of that.”ⁱⁱⁱ Friends, we must practice Tolerance, the Dangerous Virtue.

i. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 131

ii. Our own Trinity Western University went through quite a saga during the 90’s with the British Columbia Teacher’s College. The Canadian NEA tried to prevent Trinity’s teacher education program from gaining certification because the school has a moral code that forbids sexual promiscuity. They viewed that as prejudicial against homosexuals (though it applied to everyone, including heterosexuals) and claimed that Trinity graduates would automatically be bigots. It took nearly a decade and millions of dollars in legal fees before the university won the battle. If I were Dr. Neil Snider, Trinity’s president, I think I would have been tempted to call down fire from heaven on the Canadian NEA. But that is not God’s normal way.

iii. In St. Louis, which is a very Catholic city, we had over 1200 people in our congregation who were practicing Catholics less than a decade earlier. These people had come to personal faith in Christ, left Catholicism (many at great peril to family relationships), and joined First Free. Why? Because we didn’t bash Catholics; we just preached truth. Does Catholicism deserve bashing? Yes, some of their doctrines are certainly opposed to Scripture, but what opportunity would we

have to reach those people if we simply attacked all they had ever known instead of telling them what they had never known? Someone once said, “A dog can whip a skunk any day, but it’s rarely worth it.”

One Sunday I took a survey in our church in St. Louis. I asked the question, “How many of you are refugees from liberalism?” About one third of the audience raised their hands. They had come to us from PCUSA churches, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, Methodist, UCC, you name it. Then I asked, “How many of you are refugees from fundamentalism?” You know something—just as many people raised their hands. They had come to us from the IFCA, the GARB, from the Free Methodists, independent Baptists, Church of Christ, etc.

That confirmed something I had been thinking for a long time. People are looking for a clear trumpet sound in regard to the fundamentals of the faith, thus they are leaving the liberal churches in droves. But at the same time, they are looking for an attitude of love and acceptance rather than militant legalism, so they are also leaving the fundamentalist churches in droves. Biblical balance is the key.