

A Biblical Perspective on Tolerance

By Rebecca S. May

- *How is tolerance defined today?*
- *Can tolerance and truth co-exist?*
- *What is the effect of tolerance?*
- *What does the Bible say about tolerance?*

We are living in a time of hyper-tolerance. The world teaches that not only is it good to tolerate adultery, abortion, divorce, fornication, homosexuality, sorcery, idolatry, and dishonesty, it is often considered morally courageous.

Since the world is Satan's kingdom, it only makes sense that he would convince people they should tolerate what God does not. What does not make sense is that Christians are adopting this idea of tolerance.

Not too long ago, the verse most believers knew and quoted was, *For God so loved the world* Today, the verse most believers know is, *judge not lest you be judged*. Not too long ago believers knew where to find John 3:16 and the context in which it was written. Today, believers who quote *judge not lest you be judged* don't have a clue where it can be found nor the context in which it was written.

Not only is it ignorant to quote this verse out of context, it also proves a believer can be motivated to please the world by adopting and even promoting this idea of tolerance.

Definitions

"Tolerance" is defined as, "the capacity for or practice of recognizing and respecting the opinions, practices, or behavior of others" ("The American Heritage Dictionary," p. 1275). In other words, if you have the ability to respect others' opinions, practices or habits, and behavior, you are by definition tolerant. And such tolerance, as it has been defined and traditionally understood, is a virtue.

But that is not how tolerance is taught and understood today. By adding the word "sin" to the definition, today's tolerance has become something which is detrimental rather than helpful. It is not simply the opinions of others on politics, for example, which we are supposed to tolerate, but their opinions on what is or is not sin. Tolerance isn't limited to someone's habit of, say, nail biting but applies to their sinful habits as well. Today, it is not only good to respect different behavior but sinful behavior as well. This identifies the foundational problem with this new understanding of tolerance. It puts the power to determine right or wrong in the hands of people rather than God, when, in fact, it is God who decides what is right and wrong (Deuteronomy 5:32).

Truth

Acceptance, belief, and practice of today's view of tolerance requires a rejection of truth. Truth is the way things actually are. To violate the way things are is disastrous. For example, if it's true that jumping off the Sears Tower will kill you, then it can't be true that jumping off the Sears Tower will not kill you. Therefore, it is disastrous to tolerate jumping off the Sears Tower. God said there are certain rules and standards which are true for everyone. If there are no rules or standards which apply without exception to everyone, then everyone gets to decide for himself the rules which apply and truth is lost. For the majority of Christians, this is already happening.

George Barna, in his book "What America Believes: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States" (p. 85), states:

53% of Bible believing conservative Christian adults do not believe in absolute truth.

The reason they **do not** believe in absolute truth is because they **do** believe in tolerance. If morality is independent and varies with the individual, then the possibility for justice and reason are lost. To those who accept tolerance and thereby reject truth, Charles Finney claims, “there is no reasoning with such a one” (Charles Finney, “Finney’s Systematic Theology,” p. 17).

Effects

Tolerance has a negative effect on many aspects of the spiritual life of a believer.

Christ

It affects his relationship to Christ, who is Truth (John 14:6), and yet truth and tolerance cannot co-exist.

Scripture

It affects your study and understanding of God’s Word, which is truth (John 17:17).

Love

It affects our ability to love because love *rejoices with the truth* (1 Corinthians 13:6).

Worship

It affects our ability to worship. Christ says, ... *true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth* (John 4:23-24).

Freedom

Finally, adherence to tolerance affects our freedom. Christ said, *everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin* (John 8:34). Not only is it right to adhere to truth, it produces freedom; *If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free* (John 8:31-32). After reading these verses, one might ask, Why would a believer practice or endorse such an unbiblical view which destroys truth? Romans 2:8 reveals the answer. *Those who do not obey the truth, Paul says, are selfishly ambitious.*

Bible

With the exception of parallel passages, the word “tolerance” appears in only three places in the Bible. In none of these passages does it say or even suggest that we are to tolerate sin. Rather, every place where the word is mentioned, it’s done in reference to the condemnation of sin.

Gospels

In the two gospel accounts, Christ compares the sin of one group of people to the sin of another. With reference to His disciples, Christ says, *And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city* (Matthew 10:14-15). The sin of both will not be tolerated. Actually, Christ is describing His degree of intolerance.

With reference to the cities of Galilee, Christ says, *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you* (Matthew 11:20-24). In comparing the sin of one city to another, Christ, again, is not describing His tolerance of sin, rather He is emphasizing His degree of intolerance.

Revelation

Revelation 2:20 is the only other place tolerance is mentioned in the Bible. In His message to the believers in Thyatira, Christ says, *I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols* (Revelation 2:19-20).

The Greek word which is translated “tolerate” in verse 20 is *aphiemi*, which means “to send away, leave alone, or permit.” It is here where we can see exactly what is going on within Christianity today. Believers do good deeds, they love one another,

they have faith and are growing in Christ. Yet rather than judge one another, which is commanded (Matthew 18:15-17), we tolerate sin. Tolerance of sin is sin. If Christ were to critique believers today, He might say, I have this against you, that you “send away” and/or “leave alone” sinners rather than confronting them in their sin. You permit sin for the cause of tolerance, thus endorsing the very thing you claim to hate. Rather, “*these are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and ... let none of you devise evil in your heart ... and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,*” declares the Lord (Zechariah 8:16-17).

Questions and Answers

Q: *How is tolerance defined today?*

A: Tolerance today means respecting someone’s opinions, practices, and behavior even if their opinions, practices, and behavior are sinful or promote sin.

Q: *Can tolerance and truth co-exist?*

A: Since tolerance accepts sin and God doesn’t, it is impossible for tolerance and truth to co-exist.

Q: *What is the effect of tolerance?*

A: For the believer, acceptance of tolerance affects many aspects of his spiritual life; specifically, the understanding of Christ and His Word, the ability to love and worship, and the freedom to live the spiritual life.

Q: *What does the Bible say about tolerance?*

A: God says to the believers in Thyatira, *I have this against you, that you tolerate ...* (Revelation 2:20).