

They're intolerant

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[0 : 0 0] It was great to see all of you here. And so we are here at our last topic for the series. And I guess I have to say that of all three topics, this one, this final one, is definitely the most contentious.

For if there ever was a hot-button issue of the moment that's generating lots of emotion, then this would be it. You just have to turn on the TV, read the papers, and you notice that it seems everyone's tolerance or intolerance, as the case may be, is on review.

And the terrible events like the Orlando shooting, occurring as it does in the midst of an American presidential election, and then also our own Australian elections, has sort of cranked up the temperature even more.

So now every public person's actions or words are being analysed and measured against this supposed supreme virtue of tolerance. It seems in this day and age that the number one sin is intolerance.

And Christians, whether we want to or not, are caught up in this huge debate, simply because I think we have clear views on what is right and wrong. So much so that even just to have that view alone, that there is such a thing as right and wrong, leads some of us to be called intolerant.

[1 : 2 4] And so I'm very conscious that in the next hour or so, the path that lies ahead of us is one full of minefields. And because I'm the one doing most of the talking, I'm probably the one most likely to step on them.

So perhaps it would be wise for me just to make a few opening remarks, just to try and sort of clear a safe path for us, but for me in particular.

So first let me just acknowledge the hurt that people may have suffered. It may be that some of you here tonight have been bullied or ostracised or been called names by intolerant people.

And that's you, then let me say I'm sorry it's happened to you. It may even be that some of these things were done by people who are called Christians. Christians. Well, rest assured, I'm not here tonight to defend their actions.

But just like everyone else, Christians aren't perfect. Even when we know the right thing to do, we often fall short of it. And sometimes things can be said with the best of intentions, and yet they are perceived differently by the hearers.

[2 : 3 3] And this is particularly so, I think, when people are being put on the spot. When you have a TV camera shoved in your face or whatever, it's easy to sound defensive or to express things clumsily.

It might even happen to me tonight. So can I plead for some sense of graciousness from all parties tonight? Let's give one another the benefit of the doubt.

And then finally, by way of opening remarks, I want to say that what I'll be discussing tonight is the matter of tolerance itself. I know that the issue of the moment is same-sex marriage, and it would be very tempting to just focus in on that hot topic.

But actually, I just want to broaden the conversation up, because I believe that there's more at stake here than just one issue. The important of that issue is that the criticism that Christians are intolerant goes to the way Christians make decisions and how we express our views more generally.

The topic then is about how we conduct ourselves when we disagree and why Christians respond the way they do, and then to work out whether that is in fact intolerant or not.

[3 : 40] Now, if you have a specific interest in what the Bible says about same-sex attraction, then can I commend to you some of the upcoming talks that Ridley is holding? I think I've got a slide on that.

You might even have a fly in your newsletter. They're happening over in August. There's a U.S. lecturer which Ridley has invited called West Hill, and he'll be speaking on this very topic, on a range of issues.

One of the talks will actually be held here at Holy Trinity on August 2nd. I believe that's a Tuesday night. So do come along. There are registration details. It's free, but there are registration details for that.

Well, let's begin with, I guess, the question then. What is intolerance? How do we define it? And I think many of you would probably think, yeah, I know what that is, but let me give you a classical definition that goes something like this.

Tolerance is the ability and willingness to recognize and respect the existence of opinion and behavior which one dislikes or disagrees with. And often people refer to this popular quote to encapsulate it, which is on the next slide.

[4 : 48] They say, I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. You might have come across that before. Tolerance then is to be respectful of views that are different to ours.

It is to be civil to those who don't share those views and includes, amongst other things, allowing others to have their say, listening well to the reasons for why they say what they say and to allow them to act on those views, provided it's lawful.

And when we interact with them as we disagree, we will use reason and persuasion rather than to attack the person individually or personally.

Now, at one level, this is all just human decency, right? After all, it's sort of been ingrained to us from the time we're in kindergarten that we should be nice to each other, that we should try and not offend others.

And so it's hard to imagine anyone sort of disagreeing with being tolerant. Everyone, and not just Christians, ought to practice this. But of course, Christians, we have Jesus' own commands to reinforce this, don't we?

[5 : 59] So in Matthew 7 and verse 12, Jesus says, do unto others what you would have them do to you. For this sums up the law and the prophets, sums up the whole of the Old Testament.

And then in Mark chapter 12 and verse 31, a direct quote from Leviticus, the Old Testament, a third book of the Old Testament, love your neighbor as yourself. In fact, this is probably the other way around.

We can attribute the virtue of tolerance that is now seen in Western society to what is being taught in the Bible rather than the other way around. But whatever the case, tolerance, I want to argue, is a thoroughly Christian virtue.

Furthermore, for Christians, the thing that underpins tolerance isn't just a vague sense of wanting to be nice to others or not to cause offense, but actually it's deeply ingrained in our belief that every human being is made in the image of God.

This belief was given to us in our first reading today in Genesis, verse 26. Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the, you know, fish in the sea, the birds, and so on, over creation.

[7 : 10] And so we believe everyone possesses this inherent dignity and therefore has the right to be treated with respect. All humans ought to be able to make choices without coercion and not to have their freedom of speech curtailed.

It is a dignity which we extend to all human beings, regardless of age, gender, race, or intelligence. And everyone has it in equal measure, regardless of how powerful you are, how popular you are, whether you're wealthy or not, whether you're wise or not.

Everyone has that in equal measure. So if tolerance is a Christian virtue, reinforced by what is being said in the Bible, reinforced by our fundamental belief that humans are made in God's image, then why are Christians being branded as intolerant?

Well, I think it's because what has happened in recent times is that a change has come over the very practice of tolerance itself. Society in general and perhaps the media in particular has now made tolerance the supreme virtue.

As I put it earlier, intolerance is the number one sin. Imagine if today you just want to silence someone or ostracize them from society, then all you need to do is label them intolerant or bigoted.

[8 : 42] No one's able to or permitted to say that's a higher priority than being tolerant. It's the number one virtue. And if someone speaks out, all that is needed is to call that hate speech and it stops any discussion of the actual merit of the conversation or the content of what is being said.

So for example, there are some politicians who are arguing against having a public side on marriage because they think that those who are for keeping marriage as it is will endow in hate speech.

Regardless of what they say, it's now hate speech just for holding those views. Now how do we get to this? How do we get to this subtle but significant change in the very definition of tolerance itself?

Because according to this view, tolerance is now no longer just respecting differences of views. It actually requires the acceptance of all deferring views.

That is, if you disapprove of someone's views or lifestyle, you're not allowed to say so because that, by definition, is being intolerant. And if you drill down further, I think this change has arisen because most people's view of truth has changed.

[10 : 02] Their definition of tolerance has changed because they've actually changed their views on what truth is. Now some of you will know that hydrangeas, anyone? Picture of the flower there?

Hydrangeas come in many colors, yes? My wife tells me so. I think I've seen it on the sill. But what the colors are what colors they actually turn out to be, does anyone know?

It actually depends on pH of the soil. Very good. Well, tolerance is a bit like that too. How you see tolerance is determined by what you understand truth to be.

Truth is like the pH of the soil and tolerance the color of the hydrangea. And so the classic definition of tolerance was based on the view that there was such a thing as objective truth, some absolute basis for truth, and that could be discovered or determined.

Now, however, particularly on moral and religious issues, the common view is that truth is subjective or relative. Truth is whatever works for you. And some may even go as to say that there's no such thing as absolute truth.

[11 : 08] And so, because of that, we should be accepting of everyone's views and by extension everyone's morality. Now, some may still say that there's absolute truth, but then they will say that there's no way of discovering what it is.

Besides, they say every religion or moral philosophy, well, they capture some aspect of this absolute truth anyway. So it doesn't really matter what you believe because all paths lead eventually to this truth.

But, under any of these understandings of truth, the practical outcome is still the same. If you think truth is subjective or relative, then you have, it follows that you have no right to say others are wrong.

And so, to be tolerant is to accept everyone's views and not challenge them or worse, to try and impose your own on others. Further, I think people now also tie their sense of identity so tightly to their race, their religion, their gender or their sexuality that any criticism of views on these matters is seen as a direct attack on the people themselves because it's attacking their identity.

And so, for example, you can't criticize the views of an indigenous person who's talking about his own culture or a woman when she speaks about women's issues or a gay person when he talks about gay rights.

[12 : 32] People can't divorce the issue from the person. To disagree with the issue is to hate the person. Now, I'm not suggesting for one moment that we shouldn't be respectful when we disagree or that the indigenous person or the woman or the gay person has no right to speak about their own experiences or even that their views should not be given extra weight.

For too long, I think we failed to allow them to speak. We failed to empathize with their plight. But take a look with me again at that definition of tolerance. Have a look at it.

What does tolerance even mean anymore if there has to be an acceptance of all views? Where is there any room for disapproval or disagreement?

If you look at the definition, the classic definition of tolerance actually requires that there is differences of views to have people to disagree with each other. And so, can you see why now people are actually talking past each other?

Why are they making the same accusations of each other? Each side's view of truth results in a different view of tolerance and therefore leads to the conclusion that the other side is intolerant.

[13 : 46] So, if you believe in relative truth, then the very fact that you believe that not all views can be true makes you intolerant. On the other hand, if you believe there is absolute truth and what is important is freedom of speech so that the truth can come out as you talk about it, then you will find that those who are trying to shut you up, they are being intolerant.

A saying goes, you may disagree with me, but you need to defend to the death my right to say it. But the person who believes in relative truth does not hold to that view.

Well, tolerance does require that we be allowed to express our differences in a civil manner. And so, Christians are being called out as intolerant by those whose view of truth is relative.

While at the same time, Christians feel the other side is intolerant because they are slifing the process by which truth can be determined. Both sides are arguing over tolerance when in fact what we are really discussing is the concept of truth and how we should go about determining what the truth is.

I think that is where the conversation should be rather than fighting over who is intolerant. In other words, get the pH of the soil right and the color of the hydrangea will follow. Work on what the truth is and the matter of tolerance, I think, will just sort itself out.

[15 : 14] Yes, there are those who are truly intolerant. I freely admit that there are people who hate others just because they disagree with them. But I think they are actually in a very small minority.

For the rest, simply disagreeing shouldn't make them intolerant by definition. And for us as Christians, even if someone is truly intolerant, we should still strive to treat them tolerantly.

For they too, despite their faults, are made in God's image, are they not? So Jesus taught us to love our enemies. That is, love those who are intolerant to us.

Because the reality is that God loved us even when we were his enemies by sending his son Jesus for us. And so if there is anyone who vehemently disagrees with Christianity, if there is anyone who even thinks that we are intolerant, well, we would still welcome them into our midst.

We are not going to ostracize them or bully them. But we will speak what we believe to be the truth to them. And we will do it in love.

[16 : 29] We will not be afraid to disagree, is what I'm saying. But as Christians, we have to believe that there is objective truth, that there is right and there is wrong.

We cannot believe that truth is only relative. And I, you know, I actually think most people believe that. Deep down, even though they may say one thing, what they actually do is actually reflect that they believe that there is absolute truth.

Now, how am I so sure? Well, let's test this by an example. Take, for example, lying. Does anyone in this room, apart from those who are trying to be mischievous, does anyone in this room believe that lying is good?

Well, some of you might say, well, in some situations, lying should be permitted, you know, like white lies or something like that, or lying is necessary if you're trying to stop a greater wrong from being done. But even that presupposes that telling the truth is a good thing in the first place, that truth is good and lies are bad.

Well, that's actually a statement in objective truth, is it not? Truth is good is actually an objective truth. And I bet you wouldn't find anyone believing the opposite.

[17 : 53] it. Furthermore, if someone believes that all views are equally valid, then how can they object when someone holds to the view that truth is objective?

Because that particular view should be as valid as any other, should it? If you think all views are valid, then I've just made a view that truth is objective, then that view should be valid as well.

But people get upset when we say truth is objective. tolerance includes being tolerant even to the person who says truth is objective. Can you see how the logic starts to unravel unless you really hold to the reality that there is objective truth?

Just believing that truth is relative, it's very hard, it's very shaky the ground on which you stand. But I want to go further than that because for Christians, truth isn't simply objective, truth for us is also revealed.

Incidentally, when I speak about truth, I'm not talking about who killed JFK, those kind of truths, or where did flight MH370 end up or not end up. No, I'm talking about moral and metaphysical truth.

[19 : 07] For us, those kind of truths exist through revelation or comes to us through revelation. Christians believe that this sort of truth isn't something which we can discover by ourselves solely through reason or reflecting on the world.

Why? Because we accept that our human minds are finite, but more importantly, we believe that we are sinful. That is, our minds and feelings are tainted by moral failure, and we are unwilling to face up to the truth about ourselves.

And so we are unable to come to the truth ourselves, whether as individuals or as a society together. Instead the truth or truth has to be revealed to us.

And God, in fact, has generously done that in the Bible, in the person of Jesus Christ's Son. And so we heard in our second reading tonight that Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. Elsewhere in the Gospel, and I've got the second verse at the bottom of the outline, Jesus says, if you hold on to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

[20 : 15] Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. So you see, Christians have to make these exclusive claims to truth.

Why? Because Jesus does it himself. It goes to the very integrity of what we believe. If we disown the claims of Jesus as being the only way, then in effect we're disowning Jesus as well.

And so we can't call ourselves Christians or his disciples. It's actually that black and white. If we don't hold to his teachings, we cannot be his disciples, and we will lose the only truth that will set us free.

And so if that makes us as Christians intolerant in the eyes of the world, based on the world's definition of tolerance, then I suppose so be it.

I will wear that label. Because as Christians, we're committed to truth. We're committed to truth before tolerance. And to ask Christians to deny what they believe is true, simply for the sake of this misguided view, I think, of tolerance, is like asking a vegan to eat meat, or asking an environmentalist to support fossil fuels.

[21 : 35] It's a violation of our conscience, a denial of our faith. We can't do it. Now, I don't say any of this with any form of arrogance at all.

Christians are not claiming that we have the truth because we deserve it, or we've come to it because we merit it. No, we have the truth. We're like beggars who have just discovered that the best food from the best restaurant in town is being given out free at the back entrance.

And we're simply urging all the other beggars to come and get some too. We're stopping them from foraging in the dumps because they can get this best food at the restaurant. Come, we say, to feast at what is true, what is simply marvelous.

So, friends, if you're really seeking the truth tonight, then let me urge you to come to Jesus. Check him out. Hopefully, I've managed to persuade you that there is objective truth and that when Christians claim to have it, they're not being intolerant.

You heard Vijay said that we're running a Christianity Explored course which you were studying. Well, come to that. And what I trust you discover when you do is that it's in Jesus that we find our true identity.

[22 : 47] We discover who we truly are. That's what it means to be set free. That we're actually not defined by our race, our gender, or sexual orientation, but that God loves each of us because we are made first and foremost in his image.

And I trust that you will discover too that God isn't just tolerant of us, he actually loves us. Even though we have not returned that love because we've rejected him instead.

No, even when we've done that, he's willingly given his son for us, the one he loves above all else, so that if we come to him through Jesus, the only way to truth and life, we will be set free.