

TOLERANCE AND THE CHRISTIAN
Matthew 5:38-48

INTRO: Tolerance, is a word that has become important today. So, just what does this word 'tolerance' mean? Well, in brief, here is my personal definition: *Tolerance is to allow, endure, or put up with something we do not agree with, approve of, like or enjoy.* Let me say a few things I will not take time to explain, but you can chew on them. Tolerance operates in the areas of grey. It is in that area between what you like and what you will not tolerate. It operates in the grey areas. Second, tolerance does not mean to agree with or accept, otherwise it ceases to be tolerance. And third, all tolerance has an end; something that goes too far, otherwise tolerance also ceases to be tolerance. I can't develop those thoughts though they are important. So we will be looking at things tolerable, and things intolerable.

This matter of tolerance plays a big role in all of our lives. It is exercised in a great number of areas of life. It does not matter what business or work you are in, there will be some tolerance. It does not matter what your political views, there will be some tolerance. You see, I will only tolerate so or so much problems with my vehicle and then I want to trade it off. I will only pay so or so much for another vehicle or my tolerance level for that vehicle has been surpassed. A policeman will tolerate certain minor infractions of the law, but he has a limit. He will tolerate only so many kilometers per hour over the speed limit, or he will ticket the driver. That limit may depend on whether he had a good day or a bad day or whether it is in the morning or later in the afternoon etc.. We tolerate certain minor infractions from our children, but even the most undisciplined child finds a limit to his parent's tolerance. There is tolerance in farming, how crooked a furrow may be or how much of a strip may be left standing when swathing, but there is a limit. If there was no limit, tolerance would no longer be tolerance. Mechanics has certain degrees of tolerance. Almost every field of work or study has certain degrees of tolerance. But if there is no limit, tolerance is no longer tolerance.

Our field of interest this morning is with regard to tolerance in the area of our faith or our belief, or as the world knows it, our religion. There is a common view among Christians that Christianity and religion are two different things. Religion, they say, is man seeking God, whereas Christianity is God seeking man. As I understand this word, changing from its original etymology meaning to 'bind anew', related to oaths to a

deity, it came to mean a belief in a supernatural power. So, in years past, when someone got saved it was said, "He got religion." I do not find the definition Christians use of this word in any dictionaries. So Webster, in his 1828 dictionary says in his first definition, "Religion in its most comprehensive sense, included a belief in the being and perfections of God..." In definition 4 he says, "Any system of faith and worship." That means Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc... etc... In my conclusion I would define religion as any belief in a supernatural power. In that sense Christianity is a religion too.

And so, this morning we want to take a brief overview of this subject from a Christian perspective, and believe you me, it is brief. We are going to look at God and tolerance and the Christian and tolerance with regard to believers and unbelievers.

I. GOD AND TOLERANCE

A. Things Tolerable

Well, let us begin with a question. Here it is: Is God tolerant? Well, let us once more define tolerance. *Tolerance is to allow, endure, or put up with something we do not agree with, approve of, like or enjoy.* Let me ask the question like this now: Does God allow some things, or put up with them, though He is not pleased with it?

Well, we could begin in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve sinned. Did God put up with Adam and Eve though they had sinned? Yes, of course! Does that mean He agreed with what they did? Of course not! I ask, was He tolerant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob? For all three, and I guess for all others including ourselves, we must say He has been very tolerant.

B. Things Intolerable

1. Living in sin too long

When Adam and Eve sinned and God did not terminate their lives right on the spot, He became tolerant. He tolerated their existence in sin in hopes to bring them back to Himself, and that is what happened. No doubt it is God's mercy that makes Him longsuffering, or patient or, if you like, tolerant with man. So God bears long with people, but ultimately tolerance must

run out or it is no longer tolerance. And when man insists on living in sin too long, or in certain intolerable sins, God's patience can be exhausted and tolerance has an end.

But go with me to Genesis 6 (read 1-3). I take verse 3 to mean that God patiently strives with sinful man to seek to turn him around but if there is no response, that tolerance, that patience will come to an end. You see, if there is no end to tolerance, tolerance would cease to be tolerance and it would become the rule.

And so, when mankind persisted in his evil ways God determined to destroy mankind. But He found one righteous family, and He found a way to save that family while His vengeance, which had been building up came to an end and He destroyed the rest of mankind. Tolerance had an end.

In Numbers 14:27, God said, "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation, which murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against me." Was God tolerant with Israel? Yes, very! But in this verse we can tell it is wearing thin and an indication is made that it has now been almost too long. God was tolerant with the Northern Kingdom, but in 722 B.C. that tolerance came to an end. God was patient with the Southern kingdom, but in 586, that came to an end as well. You see, tolerance must have an end or it is no longer tolerance.

Now listen to Nehemiah 9:30, "Yet for many years You had patience with them, And testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands." God had patience for many years. You do not need patience when things go your way, and with Israel, things were not going God's way. So, God sent prophets and He warned them. His tolerance level was getting lower and lower. And when tolerance and warning failed, He gave them into the hands of a people they did not want to be in. God's tolerance had run out.

Then look at Romans 2:4 (read). You see, the fact that repentance is needed tells us God is being tolerant.

Things are happening that He is not pleased with but He is patient and forbearing, or tolerant. And through this patience and forbearance He seeks to turn them to the right. But when sin is persisted in too long, God's tolerance runs out.

2. Committing certain sins

Now consider that there are some sins that God does not tolerate. In the days of Moses, Korah, Dathan and Abiram rose up with 250 leaders in Israel against Moses. They gathered together against Moses and told him that he was exalting himself among the congregation. Well, they were very disrespectful to the leader God had chosen. And Moses said, since these were priests, that they should fill their censers with incense and light them with fire, and gather before the Lord. And the Lord came down and He said to them, "Separate yourselves from among this congregation that I may consume them in a moment." So they did that and Moses said, "By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me" (Num. 16:28-29). Well, when Moses was done speaking, the earth split under all those men who rebelled, and they went alive down into this crack and then it closed again and they were gone! God's tolerance fuse was very short here!

Shortly thereafter the people blamed Moses for the death of these rebels, and God destroyed 14,700 Israelis by a plague. And if Moses had not mediated, many more would have died. God's tolerance goes only so far. There are numerous times such cases have been recorded. To Israel, God said, "You shall not suffer a witch to live" (Ex. 22:18). There was zero tolerance for this sin. There are more cases like this.

There is a case like this in the NT. It is the case of Ananias and Saphira. It seems that God, right there at the beginning of the Church, wanted to give a lesson to all Church age believers to come. And Ananias and Saphira died, both the same day. They had lied to God. There are times when God's tolerance level is at zero. We do not understand all His reasons, nor do we need

to, we need to understand that tolerance does have an end.

II. THE CHRISTIAN AND TOLERANCE

A. Towards Unbelievers

1. Society

In the great commission, the Lord Jesus commissioned the Church to reach the entire world. That is a global commission, if you like. Jesus said to believers, you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free and you shall share this truth with the world. Pilate scoffed at Jesus and said, "And tell me kind sir, just what is truth?" Well, Jesus had already answered that Question to His disciples. He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No can get saved apart from Him." The tolerance level with regard to how to get saved is very low. There is only one way!

Now let me ask you a question with regard to the believer's conduct in society: Can the believer be tolerant of all religions and at the same time hold the view that all except true Christians will go to hell? Well, that depends on how you define the term 'tolerance'. If tolerance means to accept or agree with them, then the answer is no. But that is not a correct definition. As I have defined it, and I believe it is correct, I believe the answer is we can be tolerant and still hold to our view. Unlike the Catholic Church of the past, and the Muslim religion of the present, we present to anyone of any religion what we believe to be the truth, BUT we fully respect their decision to reject what we believe is the truth. We leave the truth to them. Am I right?

Even though they reject our view, we will live with them in peace. We do not kill anyone, or put them in prison, and I trust we do not even persecute them in any way, if they disagree with us. We will live and let live. And hopefully we will go beyond that, and as we were instructed in Scripture, we will seek to live at peace with all men if at all possible. Christianity is a most tolerant religion, and yet, more and more, it is among the most hated and non-tolerated views of life.

But, in presenting the truth; we, as Christians, have found that few want the truth and that this causes a reaction in them so that many of the other religions would like to get us out of the way. In John 14-17, just before Jesus was captured, in a few brief hours, Jesus instructed the disciples on the future. These are incredibly significant chapters. And in these chapters He warned the believers that when they went out into the world, they would be hated. Look for a moment at 15:18-19 (read).

In 16:8 Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit had come, He would reprove the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. Well, you know through whom He would do that. It is the Christian. And the world hates being reproved of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. And because they hate the message, they try to find ways to get rid of the messenger.

So, from this we learn that in this world; we, and this world will be at odds. We do not hate them. We do not try to get rid of them. They try to get rid of us. The apostle Paul tells us that all that will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. And Jesus said in Matthew 5 that when we are persecuted we are blessed people, and we are to rejoice when we suffer persecution (Matt. 5:11-12).

But then I want you to see the instructions He left us on how to live in such a world (Matt. 5:38-48). Now I ask you, does that take tolerance? Well, let me define it again: *Tolerance is to allow, endure, or put up with something we do not agree with, approve of, like or enjoy.*

Now we live in a very blessed land. It is easier to get persecuted from Christians than non-Christians in our country. But most of the earth is populated with a people that will gladly exterminate Christians. And these words of tolerance Jesus expressed in Matthew 5 hold true in those countries as well.

The Muslim's would like the right to practice Sharia law wherever they are and I understand Sharia law means Muslims simply want the right to do whatever they want the right to do. It is not a written code of

law or ethics that you can check to see if you agree. It is subject to their wants and wishes. Sharia law does not know about tolerance, unless it is for Muslim men or the lawgivers themselves. And if they gained that right, they would kill every non Muslim.

2. Government

But what about tolerance towards government? How far does it go? Romans 13 says, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities." We must be tolerant of numerous laws the government puts in place. We don't like them, but we obey them. In the early Church, the apostles were warned about witnessing. And Peter said, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to listen to you more than God, you judge. For we cannot but be obedient to witness." So then some of the disciples were put into prison for successfully evangelizing Jews. But at night an angel opened the doors and the angel said, "Get out there and witness as God said!" If you want to read the whole account it is in Acts 4 and 5.

But in this passage we learn the Christian principle that governs the Christian's tolerance of government requirements. According to Romans 13, we are to obey the governing authorities. But here, another principle comes into play, we must obey God more than man.

What encouraged me to preach this message is because in Quebec, Canada, an ethics course on religions has just been made mandatory in school. Christians have sought to change that ruling but to no avail. Now let me ask you a question: Do the Christian parents in Quebec have the divine right to keep their children out of that class? Yea, we might ask, does any Christian parent have the right to keep their children out of school and teach them themselves? If you answer this question you will have the answer to that question: To whom did God delegate the responsibility to teach their children; the government or the parents? Well, there is no question as to the answer.

When our people moved into Russia they made their agreement with Tsarina, Catherine the Great. Then Paul I became Tsar and he continued the agreement made with the Mennonites. The first article allowed them to not

swear in courts of law. In article six they were granted freedom from military service. With regard to teaching their children and preaching, it seems they were given free reign. When our forefathers came from Russia to Canada, they asked for several areas of tolerance from Canadian law. This was granted, and when they came to Canada, they did so with the agreement of freedom from military service and freedom to teach their children and preach the Word of God as they saw fit. In article 10, the Canadian agreement with our forefathers reads like this: *The fullest privileges of exercising their religious principles is by law afforded the Mennonites, without any kind of molestation or restriction whatever; and the same privilege extends to the education of their children in schools.*

This agreement, which came from Ottawa, is dated July 23, 1873. I am not sure what the government would say to that agreement today, but when we came to this country, we never expected the government to build schools for our children or to provide teachers to train our children or to bus them to school. As a matter of fact, that is one of the things we did not want. We wanted to maintain the Biblical right to train our own children.

When we left Russia, we did so because that government violated their agreement with us. We have now been in Canada longer than we were in Russia, and as far as I know, only with regard to education has the Canadian government ever violated its agreement. What happened is that for a while we were forced into sending our children to public school until they were 15 or 16 years of age. And if parents did not send them, they could be put in jail. Today, we once again have the right from the government to train our own children if we want to.

Now I must add that just as I finished writing this message, word came by e-mail that the new Education Act, (Bill 2) is being proposed in Alberta. If it goes through, it will force all home school parents to political correctness in their homes. I understand this act has been responsible for repressing almost all forms of religious expression. It may affect how or whether the parent can read the Bible or how they

pray with their children, or even how they share their faith with their own children. The political correctness police may be on their doorstep. So, it seems, signs of religious freedom may be about to undergo some changes.

But when it comes to what we are obligated to when the Scripture says everyone is to be subject to the higher powers, depends on what the Scriptures teach is our right or our obligation. When the government violates our God given rights, they have trespassed beyond what God allows, and our first responsibility is to God. This holds true in every area where the government may require that which God instructs us otherwise on.

B. Towards Believers

1. Things Tolerable

Next we ask, what kind of tolerance is there to be between Christians? Does the Bible address that? Or maybe I could first ask this question, as Christians, do we have things we differ on? Of course there are! You see, we differ on such things as diets, what we may eat; and days, what days are holy. I cannot take time to deal with that here, but Romans 13 deals in detail with how to be tolerant in such areas.

Then look at Ephesians 4:1-3 (read). Because we have so many little things that cause us trouble, we must learn to be longsuffering. You understand I am not talking about when one believer sins against another. We will deal with that later but that is intolerable if it cannot be fixed. But there are many other things where tolerance, or longsuffering is required. Longsuffering, means putting up with things you disagree with or that bother you, but they are not necessarily sin. Then we are to bear with one another in love. To bear with one another is to bear or endure things with each other. You do not have to endure things you like. It is the things you don't like you have to endure.

Is it easy to work together in a church? Is it easy on brotherhood meetings to have your opinions rejected or disregarded? As Christians, there are three major areas God uses to conform us to the image of His Son.

They are the home, the workplace, and the church. The easiest one to eliminate is the church. If you don't have church meetings, and you don't have SS responsibilities or other responsibilities, it is much easier to tolerate other believers. But get in the same rock polisher or tumbler with them, and that is entirely different.

2. Things Intolerable

But now we ask, are there in the church, things intolerable. The Bible is very clear about some of these things. Others we have more difficulty with. I will deal with these very generally. First, there is the matter of when a Christian sins against a Christian. That is intolerable. We find this in Matthew 18 (read 15-18). This is not when you are offended by another Christian. This is when you are sinned against by another Christian. And our modern Evangelical response is unconditional love or unconditional forgiveness, but that is not the way of the Bible. The Bible teaches, very clearly, that such matters need to be dealt with even if excommunication is required. A Christian sinning against a Christian, is intolerable.

Then there is the matter of teaching false doctrine. That is intolerable in the Church. It is dealt with in Titus 3:10 and 1 Timothy 1:20 (read Titus 3:10). When you study these passages you learn that theological heresy is the issue. Such a person is to be allowed opportunity to repent, and if that does not happen he is to be rejected. The teaching of heresy in the Church is intolerable.

Then, if a believer commits sin of a serious nature, he is to be excommunicated as soon as possible without further warning (1 Cor. 5). There is no 2 or 3 step process. There is zero tolerance. The only acceptable action by the wrongdoer is repentance.

The fourth and last situation that the Scripture sets out is found in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 (read?). Again, there is some patience in such a situation, but then such a person is to be avoided. Such actions are intolerable in the church.

CONCL: Tolerance, is it biblical? Yes, in very many situations. Intolerance, is it biblical? Yes, in certain cases. But tolerance must have a line, an end, otherwise it is no longer tolerance. It is crucial to remember that tolerance does not mean to accept or agree with something. It means to put up with things though you do not agree or accept those things. May the Lord grant us wisdom in this matter of tolerance.