

IS CHRISTIANITY INTOLERANT? (OT: Mic 6:6-8; NT: Jn 12:1-11)

INTRODUCTION

- **Voltaire** – 18C French Philosopher: *“Of all religions, the Christian should of course inspire the most tolerance, but until now Christians have been the most intolerant of all men.”*¹
 - What do you think about that?
 - Are Xns intolerant?
 - Always judging people who don’t LIVE/LOOK/LOVE like them?
 - And what about first part of quote → Should Xnty inspire most tolerance?
- My answers: Yes, No, Maybe → So much depends on what you think tolerance is.

Transition: So, let’s do this: 1) Two different approaches to tolerance; 2) The problem with one; 3) How the gospel creates the other.

TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO TOLERANCE

Don Carson: Professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

- Looks a wee bit like Yoda and is as wise as him too.
- Wrote a book called *The Intolerance of Tolerance*.²
- Contrasts 2 approaches to tolerance: the OLD tolerance and the NEW.

1. **OLD: Tolerance used to be defined as accepting the EXISTENCE of different views.**

- Perfectly valid to have strong views/convictions BUT you must always insist that other people have right to disagree and argue own case.
 - More than recognize people’s right to disagree – should actively defend ability to do so.
 - *I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.*
- **OLD based on assumption** that objective truth is out there, and it’s our duty to pursue it.
 - People with different beliefs engage to persuade each other.
 - May be Muslim, Jew, Atheist, Xn → But with civility/respect ought to disagree/reason/debate – bc we all want truth to win out.

Illustrate: Powerful example of this approach comes from **Penn Jillette**.

- Half of magic/comedy team Penn and Teller → Describes himself as more than an atheist.
 - *“I believe that there is no God. I’m beyond atheism. Atheism is not believing in God. Not believing in God is easy – you can’t prove a negative, so there’s no work to do... I’m saying, “This I believe: I believe there is no God.”*³
 - Fair to say he has no bias toward people of faith!
- But after a man gave him a copy of the NT, he said this: *“I’ve always said that I don’t respect people who don’t proselytize. I don’t respect that at all. If you believe that there’s a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward – and atheists who think that people shouldn’t proselytize, ‘Just leave me alone, keep your religion to yourself’ – How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and*

*you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that."*⁴

- Penn Jillette has his own convictions BUT he also thinks it's legitimate – in fact necessary – for others to argue their case with him.

Apply:

- Rick Warren, pastor who wrote *The Purpose Driven Life* (which, I've heard, is second most translated book in world⁵), once said: "*Our culture has accepted two huge lies. The first is that if you disagree with someone's lifestyle, you must fear or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are nonsense. You don't have to compromise convictions to be compassionate.*"⁶
- That's what the OLD tolerance is all about:
 - Having convictions and compassion.
 - Hold your own view, accept the EXISTENCE of different views, then argue your own case with civility/respect.

2. NEW: Tolerance defined as accepting different views THEMSELVES.

- Not just accepting EXISTENCE of different views but accepting the views THEMSELVES.
 - People have the right to hold different beliefs...
 - But more than that, these beliefs ought not to be challenged/opposed.
- NEW **based on assumption** that no one view exclusively true → All views are equally valid.
 - You speak "Your truth" and I'll speak "My truth" ...
 - May be Muslim, Jew, Atheist, Xn → But we should all affirm each other's views.

ILLUSTRATE: Example of NEW tolerance found in chaplaincy center at **Harvard University**.

- 30+ chaplains represent many of the world's religious, spiritual, and ethical traditions.
- But all the chaplains are: "*committed to mutual respect and non-proselytization. We affirm the roles of personal freedom, doubt, and open critical reflection in healthy spiritual growth... we're here to help you have a healthy, happy experience of your own spiritual journey while you're here at Harvard.*"⁷
- Harvard's Chaplains have their own convictions but would never challenge you to accept their point of view. (One wonders what Penn Jillette would have to say to them!)

APPLY: That's the NEW tolerance...

- Not just accepting EXISTENCE of different views but accepting views THEMSELVES.
- SHIFT from Old/New: SUBTLE in form but MASSIVE in substance.
 - Move from free expression of contrary opinions to mandatory acceptance of all opinions.
 - Two very different approaches...

Transition:

- No doubt that in our culture NEW understanding of tolerance has been etched in stone.
 - Challenging other people's "Truth" makes you *judgmental, bigoted, intolerant*...
 - And in our cancel culture, that's about as bad as it gets!
- But just for a moment, let's take a step back together...
 - Allow me to suggest that this Emperor isn't wearing any clothes...
 - Having seen 2 different approaches to tolerance, let's consider:

THE PROBLEM WITH “NEW TOLERANCE”

Main problem summed up in one word: **INCONSISTENCY** → Seen in a couple of ways.

1. The NEW tolerance is INTERNALLY inconsistent.

State: NEW tolerance says be equally respectful of all beliefs bc no “truth” better than another.

But no one – even most ardent proponent of NEW tolerance – lives like this is true.

Illustrate: Someone says: “Everyone has to define right and wrong for themselves, and we shouldn’t judge the conclusions they reach.”

- “Okay,” you reply, “is there anyone in world right now doing things you believe they should not be doing, even if they think it’s okay?”
- Answer always comes back, “Well, yes, of course.”
- “Doesn’t that mean there are times we should judge the conclusions other people reach?”⁸

Apply: **No one** believes all perspectives are equally valid; **everyone** is “intolerant” of something!

- The racism of the KKK → Exploitation of the sex trade → Shooting of children in Nashville.
- Most people condemn all these things – AND RIGHTLY SO!
- But if – like the NEW tolerance – you’ve rejected objective truth and said that everyone can pursue a truth of their own → You have no logical foundation to condemn anything.
- So, when you do (and we all do)/when you’re intolerant of something (and we’re all intolerant of something) → You’re guilty of the very thing you forbid.

2. The NEW tolerance is also EXTERNALLY inconsistent.

State: NEW tolerance strangely intolerant of those who disagree with it.

- It says: “We tolerate everyone, except those we deem guilty of intolerance; they will be canceled immediately.”
- Which of course makes you guilty of what? Intolerance!

Illustrate: An example...

- “The Co-Operative Bank, based in Manchester, England, asked a Christian organization, Christian Voice, to close its accounts at the Bank because its views [on homosexuality] were “incompatible” with the position of the Bank. The public statement of the Bank reads as follows:

‘It has come to the bank’s attention that Christian Voice is engaged in discriminatory pronouncements based on the grounds of sexual orientation... This public stance is incompatible with the position of the Co-Operative Bank, which publically supports diversity and dignity in all its forms for our staff, customers and other stakeholders.’
Thus in the name of supporting diversity, the Bank eliminates one of its diverse customers! Even here it cannot be consistent: the Bank doubtless has Muslim customers who are no less willing than Christian Voice to condemn homosexual practice.”⁹

- NEW Tolerance is strangely intolerant of those with opposing views.

Apply: Fashionable but it’s deeply inconsistent – internally and externally.

Transition: Does this mean down with tolerance?! Absolutely not.

- Having seen: 1) Two different approaches to tolerance; and 2) The problem with one; let’s consider 3) How the gospel creates the other.

HOW THE GOSPEL CREATES “TRUE TOLERANCE”

- I do think the Bible calls us to OLD form of tolerance → Or true tolerance:
 - People of **conviction AND compassion**.
 - Hold fast to faith then seek to engage others with civility/respect.
- No doubt Xns – ourselves included – have often failed at this.
 - Consider this quote from a leading evangelical: *“You say you’re supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don’t have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist. I can love the people who hold false opinions but I don’t have to be nice to them.”*¹⁰
 - Doesn’t achieve anything but fire up those who already agree with you.
If you’ve experienced that from Xns or the church – I’m sorry.
- Jesus calls us to better things. Some examples:
 - **Mic 6:8:** He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to **do justice**, and to **love kindness**, and to **walk humbly** with your God?
 - **1 Pet 3:15:** In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to **make a defense** to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with **gentleness and respect...**
 - **Col 4:5-6:** Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech **always be gracious**, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to **answer each person**.

Transition: What does this look like in our lives?

1. Sometimes we need a little more CONVICTION.

- **[Problem]:**
 - In politically correct cancel culture, there’s enormous social pressure to go along with what world has to say on any given topic.
 - Generally, the younger you are, the harder this will be.
 - Especially on issues surrounding gender/sexuality.
 - Temptation to step back from some of the things the Bible has to say.
 - Either bc you start to have doubts yourself...
 - Or bc feel awkward/embarrassed to hold certain views.
- **[Solution]:**
 - You’re not crazy for following Jesus.
 - Someone might say you’re weird/Might even feel weird → But you are not weird.
 - You’re just the one willing to say that Emperor isn’t wearing any clothes.
 - Jesus said: **In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (Jn 16:33, NIV).**
 - Don’t be afraid to put hand in his/stand in own two feet/look the world in eye.
 - Have a bit of resilience about you...

2. Sometimes we need a little more COMPASSION.

- In last few years, as culture continues to shift away from Christianity, growing number of Xns have started to say that evangelical Christians are too nice.
 - Michael Kruger – President of RTS, Charlotte – does not hold this view but summarizes it this way: *“In a cultural moment like ours, we need people who are more willing to fight*

and fight vigorously against these cultural trends... the days of being winsome are over—you can't win over the world just by being nice."¹¹

- Understand that perspective/appreciate some of those concerns → But, like Kruger, see fatal problems in this way of thinking.
- **First:** It neglects the primacy of character formation.
 - God cares deeply about the kind of people we are.
 - Doesn't call us to go out and "win at all costs..." like nervous coach with job on line.
 - Instead, he calls us to go out and live like Jesus.
 - Matters to God that we live lives of kindness/humility/gentleness/respect/grace.
 - Commands us to do so that we'll become more like his Son.
 - Someone might say: "Well, Jesus was also strong!" Of course he was.
 - That's why we spoke about conviction just a moment ago.
 - But the antidote to a lack of conviction is not less compassion.
 - We're to be loaded with both!
 - We're to be like Jesus → Full of grace and truth.
 - Ends don't justify means in KoG → We live as called bc character matters to God.
- **Second:** This way of thinking also hurts our witness in the world.
 - Way we behave makes gospel more or less difficult to believe.
 - If judgmental/condemning, it turns people off to God.
 - If we live like Jesus, his aroma can draw them in.
 - This is why God calls us to love everyone...
 - Some as brothers/sisters, some as neighbors, some as enemies.
 - You get to choose what you want to call someone, but next step is to love them.
 - This makes gospel easier to receive → One more Kruger quote: "*Just like God himself, in one sense, draws us to repentance through his kindness, so we, as Christians – our graciousness and kindness can really be a key part of how we reach our world today.*"¹²
 - Can't fight the fight of faith with the world's weapons!
 - Live as he has called us to trust his ways are more effective than ours.

Transition: We're to hold the two together → Conviction and Compassion.

THE CLOSE: Can you imagine what that might look like for you?

- I got talking in a small group about how it might shape interaction with a neighbor...
- First thing you need is a little **conviction** to stay in the conversation...
- Second thing you need is a little **compassion** to seek to understand...
 - All theology is pastoral
 - Gospel need
- Then you need a combination of them both to speak as you have the chance...

Someone in your life you need to have a conversation with like that?

CONCLUSION: Back to Voltaire:

- *Of all religions, the Christian should of course inspire the most tolerance... Amen to that.*
- *But until now Christians have been the most intolerant of all men...*
 - That may or may not be true...
 - But as for us – let's live with conviction/compassion...
- It will do us good → Make us a blessing to our neighbors as well.

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*
- D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*.
- L. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*.
- P. Jillette, *There Is No God*.
- T. Keller, *The Reason for God*.
- T. Keller, *Generous Justice*.
- Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice*.
- C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*.
- Logos Bible Software.
- J. McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* and *A Ready Defense*.
- D. Plotz, *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible*.
- C. Sanders, *Introduction to Research in English Literary History*.
- F. Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*
- E. Shillito, *Jesus of the Scars*.
- L. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*.
- R. Wilbourne, *Seek Justice*.

Endnotes

¹ This quote comes from Voltaire's discussion of "tolerance" in *The Philosophical Dictionary*, accessed [here](#) 5/4/23.

² This sermon draws extensively from this book.

³ Taken from Penn Jillette's essay *There Is No God* accessed [here](#) on 7/16/15.

⁴ Taken from a video blog accessed [here](#) on 7/17/15.

⁵ According to [Wikipedia](#), which is never wrong.

⁶ Accessed [here](#) on 5/4/23.

⁷ Quoted in *The Intolerance of Tolerance* by D. A. Carson, 25.

⁸ Illustration from *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller, 47.

⁹ Carson, 21-22.

¹⁰ Pat Robertson quoted in Carson, 19.

¹¹ See Michael Kruger, *What Does It Mean to Be Winsomely Reformed?* Accessed [here](#) 5/4/23.

¹² Ibid.