

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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What Does the Bible Teach About: Truth and/or Tolerance

I normally try to start with something a little lighter in my talks in an attempt to let everyone, including myself, settle into the topic. With my subject today, I am finding it difficult to think of something fitting and appropriate. At the time of writing, the conversations about truth and tolerance are fraught with danger due to the climate of society in general. However, I will point to a medical condition which will hopefully lighten the mood a little as an example where both of the words 'truth' and 'tolerance' work in perfect harmony together – Lactose Intolerance! This is a fairly common condition and I have people in my family who suffer from it. Thankfully, they don't suffer too severely. In Lactose Intolerance no one can deny that there is a truth to the condition and its consequences, and nobody can deny that there is a clear need to consider the importance of tolerance, or intolerance in this case. Here we see truth and tolerance clearly working together without any offence or annoyance to anyone, with the exception, of course, for people who suffer from it.

Now that the introductory anecdote is out of the way, we turn to the subject in hand, which is very far removed from the simplicity of talking about a medical condition. In this subject, I have the ability to cause offence very easily. I could make some who are listening to this broadcast or reading this transcript never again to consider anything I say. However, I hope that as I go through the subject the things that I say will cause people to move somewhat away from this potentially dangerous topic, and to consider how they can please God in their lives.

I will outline my basis when looking into these things before anything else. In this short time, the aim is to present biblical Truths of Christianity. Therefore, I do not intend to try and provide a commentary or argument regarding this topic. Instead I will try and point out a number of biblical principles which should be thought of when such a subject may come up. I will also point out that the primary responsibility for Christians in this world is not to win intellectual arguments, but to present the way of salvation provided by the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, we have a topic before us to consider.

I now want to look at the second key word – tolerance – and ask whether our society is as tolerant as it thinks it is. There is a great wave of opinion at the moment that we are very knowledgeable and enlightened and therefore have become more tolerant. However, without even bringing in any religious issues, we actually see a fairly intolerant society. The German President recently stated, 'wanting to silence others just because they irritate your own world view is unacceptable.' This was not aimed at anyone religious, poor or uneducated as we may naturally think, but to students and intellectuals who would consider themselves enlightened. This had followed a protest which aimed to stop a speech by representatives of a particular political party. Oddly enough, I am sure these same people would condemn such action if it was being carried out by a Government. It seems that we live in an age of ideologies, and if you happen to say you don't agree with someone's ideology, then you may be considered intolerant. It is worth keeping this in mind when we are challenged by the world's morality. The decision over what is right and wrong is constantly changing and will therefore be at odds with the consistent teaching of Christianity.

If we look in a little bit more detail at the issues that people have with Christian principles and tolerance, we would quickly see that the main issues are around the lifestyle choices and the principles of the Bible. People do not like to be told their life decisions are not right and therefore, if the Bible does this, then it is considered not tolerant. In this we come across one of the problems that people can find with the Bible. It is a most complex book dealing with people over a long period of time. And because it deals with the thoughts of men certain scriptures can be used to support a cause. After all, it says in the Bible that “there is no God” twice in the Psalms! Texts taken out of context begin to support different views. A very common event in the Bible that people often use not to challenge how to live is found in John chapter 8 verses 2 to 11:

“Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?” This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

I once heard this quoted on the radio over a discussion regarding whether the Bible taught about how to live. Those having the discussion were quick to quote the first part of the last statement where Jesus says “neither do I condemn you.” This was used as evidence that Jesus is all loving and therefore does not condemn life choices that people make. A compelling argument, but the last words of that statement do not support that. He tells the woman to “go and sin no more.” It is clear then that Jesus did not support her action, in the same way He did not support any of the actions of the others in the narrative. This is just a typical example of how Scripture can be used in a wrong way to push a particular point of view. If we want to get a true understanding of what the Bible teaches, it needs to be considered as a whole, with particular emphasis on the New Testament teaching. If we get rid of parts that people don’t like, we quickly lose the teaching and consistency that it provides. As a final point around this issue, I would point people towards Paul’s epistle to the Romans. This is a helpful book to understand the conflicting views of God’s ways and the ways of man. If we keep such scriptures in mind when we are challenged by the world, it can help us in understanding how to respond.

So, is the teaching of the Bible intolerant? This would be a key question for our topic today. I have no intention of going through any sort of list of things and why they could be considered right or wrong. The only thing I would say is that, if there is anything that is clearly stated in the Bible, then it is probably not a good idea to find a way around it. Such a course of action opens up the potential to challenge any of the fundamental teachings of the Bible. But back to the question in hand. I will now make the bold statement that Christianity is the most tolerant thing this world has. My basis for this is one of the most well known verses in the Bible – John chapter 3 verse 16:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

The “whoever” in this verse means just that – anyone can become a Christian. Anyone can put their trust for eternal salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. I don’t think there is anything in this world that could claim to be as tolerant. This can almost be difficult for people to accept as the same

offer is given to anyone who looks for it. I remember when the Commonwealth Games were on in Manchester in 2002, there was someone in our church who was part of an organisation which wanted to provide packs of Christian outreach material and some gifts for everyone involved with the Games. The organisers were taken aback when the pack was made up as it was the same pack whether it was the elite athletes, someone clearing up in the stadium or the head of the Commonwealth Games Committee. The organisation wanted everyone involved to have the chance to be introduced to Jesus Christ.

However, this open acceptance of everyone is not based upon effectively saying anything goes and it doesn't really matter. Let us go back again to our quote from John 8. Jesus didn't say that the woman was free to carry on what she was doing. He just didn't condemn her there and then. Accepting the salvation of the Lord Jesus is based upon understanding who God is, our own nature and failure, and the acceptance that we need to be saved.

Let us for a moment consider these three things that are listed and see what the Bible teaches about them. First is the understanding of who God is. If we were to turn to Exodus and chapter 19, we would read about God meeting the people of Israel on the mountain at Sinai. By all accounts, this is a frightening scene as God reveals Himself to His people. The people had agreed to follow God's ways and He wanted them to realise that this wasn't just some agreement between a couple of people on the street. They had made an agreement with the Living God. On that mountain, He was showing them that He was a righteous, holy, powerful God and He was creator and judge of all the universe. This is how we should see God as well. He is not a tired old man on high who doesn't understand who we are. He is the creator of the world and One who is above us in every way.

If we look at the second of our three criteria, we can look to many scriptures to help us here. I will just pick one for now and that is the quote in Romans chapter 3 verse 10:

“There is none righteous, no, not one.”

In this scripture the Bible teaches us a stark and simple truth – that not one of us lives up to the standard that God expects of us. There is not a way of living that pleases God when we are left to our own devices. We all fail, and we fail spectacularly.

This leads us onto the third point which is to accept that we need to be saved. When we realise that we are short of God's standard we must accept that the only way to be made right with Him is to accept and trust in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was sent into the world to do the work necessary for our salvation. There is nothing we can offer towards it; it was all provided through Him. Our verse in John chapter 3 is the supporting factor for this.

These three things help in the teaching regarding our subject as they touch at the real concerns people have when it comes to tolerance:

- Accepting that God is someone who must be considered
- Accepting that the lives we live are not as good as we would like to think they are
- Accepting that we need help to turn our lives around.

These three aspects are all stumbling blocks for people when it comes to tolerance as they are all things that we do not naturally like to hear. But they are all reasonable teachings that we find in the Bible. It is more than reasonable that the Creator of the world is wiser and more knowledgeable than we are. Given that He can create life, then it shows that He is truly master over all things concerning the universe that we live in. It is also reasonable to assume that in relation to Him we are short of the standard He expects. Now here we see how all-inclusive the Bible is. It does not say that some are righteous, and some are not. It is everyone and that includes those who may be considered to be living a 'Christian' life. Without salvation, this is our status, no matter what our life choices may be. The final aspect is one we all hate, having to admit we are helpless. But again, Bible teaching demonstrates the tolerance of God. If we had made something that did not work,

always did what it was not supposed to do and regularly ignored any instructions that were given, we would likely just throw it away. Not so with God! He still wants anyone who seeks it to benefit from His love and many blessings. What is more, He does not even put demands upon us to do so. He has done it all for us! What a wonderful God we have! I hope that these few thoughts, which really are the good news of salvation in Christianity, are an encouragement to us and make us see how truly blessed we are if we look to God.

I would now like to take up a common theme that is often stated when a topic such as the one before us here is brought up. We may often hear that well known statement that God is loving. This statement is uttered to effectively say that because God is loving then He does not really mind what goes on and we can pretty much do whatever we like. This is a very popular picture of God as it suggests that He is the most tolerant of all and will ultimately accept anything and anyone. However, looking through the Bible, I cannot find any suggestion that this theory applies. Some of the Old Testament actions that God makes are truly shocking and cause the people of God to ask what is going on. Just the other day I read in 1 Samuel chapter six that God struck thousands of His own people because they looked upon the Ark of God.

What do Christians do with things like this? Perhaps we could just pretend that these things are no longer relevant or just made up. Perhaps we should just quote New Testament scriptures. Or better yet just the Gospels as the Epistles have some difficult bits in them as well! Unfortunately, this is not a good idea as the same scriptures tell us of the love of God that people are so desperate to hold on to. It also tells us about the wonderful salvation of God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Better yet, Jesus quotes the Old Testament regularly. A bit of a risk if we are going to dismiss it! We have to take the whole of Scripture as truth if we want to rely on it for our eternal future.

Yet it cannot be denied that God is love. So, what does the Bible point us towards when it says God is loving? We should look to the greatest act of love in the Bible to guide us and that act was when the Lord Jesus gave His life at Calvary. In doing this, He took the punishment for our failure, our sins, upon Himself. Now, if God being loving means that He does not mind, then why allow His Son to die on the cross? The Bible says Jesus had to die, not to prove that resurrection was possible, but so that we could be saved. The Bible tells us that God is love, but it also tells us that He is righteous and holy and that He hates sin. It would not be reasonable to assume that love overrides this, as otherwise the Lord Jesus did not need to die. Instead, it shows that God's love means He wanted to provide a solution to this problem. The love of God meant that He has held nothing back, even His own beloved Son, in making this way of salvation open to everyone. We can also read that the love that Jesus has for us also meant that He was willing to do this great work and make this great sacrifice in order to overcome our problem. This is the teaching that the bible gives when it tells us that God is love, and how thankful we can be that this is the case! God owes us nothing and we can do nothing to earn any favour, yet His love for us has provided us with a salvation that is greater than we could ever have hoped for.

This leads me onto my final subject for our topic. Christianity is widely considered to be a set of arbitrary life rules that people of this particular faith abide by. Effectively, the Bible gives us the ten commandments, and the New Testament tops that up with some additional requirements. Therefore, this would suggest that Christianity is just another set of lifestyle rules that are restrictive if people suggest that they are the only rules to follow. However, this is not in keeping with what God wants us to be like and the Bible gives us clear teaching on this. From Exodus chapter 19, the law was brought in when the people said that they would follow the commandments of God. This in essence is the set of rules that people think Christianity is. But from that point on until the end of the Old Testament in Malachi, we see that the people fail time and time again to keep the commandments of God. It does not seem plausible to suggest then that this is what God wants for us, and Malachi effectively sums that up. So, what was the point of this long period of the time of the law? It was simply to show the nature of mankind in that we are

not able to follow a set of rules given by God. Therefore, to suggest that Christianity is just a post Jesus version of that is a little bit off the mark.

The question then is: what does God want us to do and what is His purpose for us? I have put a few scriptures below that may help us with this:

John chapter 4 verses 23 and 24:

“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John chapter 17 verse 24:

“Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.”

And lastly John chapter 20 verse 17:

“Jesus said to her, Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.”

There are several other scriptures we could look at, but I thought these were a good selection. When I look at these, I see that the Lord Jesus was introducing all through His ministry a new idea and this was that we should look to have a relationship with the Living God. Not following rules in the hope of receiving favour, but knowing God. This is what we are enabled to do when we accept the saving work of the Lord Jesus: we are given a new life and are now able to please God in our lives. We do not follow rules but look to live in a way which we know is pleasing to the One who has saved us. This is perfectly normal in our every day lives. We know the things that make our loved ones happy and we do them. In the same way, we try not to do the things that we know they do not like. It is the same for the believer and God. He has saved us, and we should be very, very happy about that. We therefore look to please Him in our lives. This is not intolerance because it is only necessary for people who know the Lord Jesus Christ to do, as it is only then that our new lives can please Him.

I have come to the end of the points I wanted to make around this topic. I hope and trust that they are of use to all who may be listening to or reading them. I may not have gone as deep into the subject as some would like, or people may disagree with what I have said. I leave you with one more verse though and it is from Acts chapter 4. It is a reminder to all who follow God that ultimately it is Him that we must answer to and not the popular opinion of the day. After all, it is He who has saved us.

“But Peter and John answered and said to them, Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge.”

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on What Does the Bible Teach About: Truth and/or Tolerance, talk number T1132.

The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated

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