

September 20, 2015

Counterculture: A Tolerant Gospel Community

Luke 6:20 – 38

We began a series of topical messages we're calling 'Counterculture: God's Alternative Gospel Community', during which we'll be examining some major issues of our culture today, like differing world views, sexual identity, marriage, abortion, adoption, politics, racial reconciliation, and the problem of evil, to name a few; and examining how the Bible calls the church to respond. In other words, how ought the church to be in the world? How should a gospel community respond and deal with a world that has become increasingly anti-church, anti-Christ, and for the most part has relegated Christians to the margins of society?

Today we're looking at one of the catch-phrases of the day that is at the same time held up as one of the highest virtues in today's society, and simultaneously used as a bludgeon to beat down ideas that run counter to the popular ideology. The word is tolerance, as in 'We need to be tolerant of each other. We need to be tolerant of other people's ideas or culture or religion or faith or sexual identity or whatever'. And it sounds fair-minded and righteous and golden-rulish, but even a cursory examination of this modern-day virtue reveals that a massive re-definition has taken place and what was once real tolerance has become instead real intolerance.

Since the word came into usage, the dictionaries have defined tolerance as the ability or willingness to put up with something, to tolerate, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with. In other words, to tolerate something means first of all that you are not in agreement with either the idea or opinion or practice that is being promoted. Disagreement with the thing is the foundation of tolerance. You don't **tolerate** people who agree with you. They're on your side. You don't have to put up with them. You agree with them. Tolerance is only for those who disagree with you. That's the basic meaning of the word. Tolerance involves permitting or allowing a point of view or behavior with which you disagree while respecting the person in the process. You don't necessarily endorse or accept the opinion or behavior, you tolerate it, giving the other person the freedom to think or act as they wish.

But today the word has been turned on its head to mean total acceptance. Disagreement has become intolerance. It comes from the widespread modern myth that true tolerance is strict neutrality. The tolerant person is a neutral person with regards to making any definitive judgements on anything. It is a product of a philosophy that says there is no absolute truth and everyone is free to live by whatever truth they understand. You therefore cannot make judgments on someone's opinion, beliefs, or lifestyle. You cannot force your personal views on anyone, and if you disagree with them, you are immediately labeled 'intolerant'. This new definition argues that because there is no one idea or reality that is exclusively true, and absolute truth cannot be known, you must accept them all and give them all equal weight.

Thomas A. Helmbock, executive vice-president of the Lamda Chi Alpha fraternity writes, *'The definition of the new tolerance is that every individual's beliefs, values, lifestyle and perception of truth claims are equal...there is no hierarchy of truth. Your beliefs and my beliefs are equal and all truth is relative.'*¹ Tolerance has come to mean total acceptance. In fact even to disagree with a person's view or reality will bring the hammer of 'intolerance' down on your head. But it doesn't take a very deep thinker to point out some glaring problems with this idea. If every belief or value or lifestyle or perception of truth is equally valid and worthy of respect we probably shouldn't be so hard on guys like Stalin and Pol Pot, or child-rapists, or sex-traffickers. Additionally, if every belief or value or lifestyle or perception of truth is equally valid and worthy of respect, then a Christian, biblical world-view should not create much controversy. But as we all know, that is not the case.

1 "Insights on Tolerance," Cross and Crescent [publication of the Lamda Chi Alpha International Fraternity] (Summer 1996):3; quoted by D.A. Carson in 'The Intolerance of Tolerance' p.12

A wedding photographer was sued for refusing to shoot a same-sex wedding. A Christian counselor was penalized for refusing to advise gay couples. Catholic Charities in Illinois shut down its adoption services rather than place children with same-sex couples as the state required. Christian bakers and florists have been hauled into court and brought up on discrimination charges for declining to participate in same-sex weddings. Just recently, in Kentucky, county clerk, Kim Davis stopped issuing all marriage licenses after the US Supreme Court's ruling in favor of same-sex marriage, and refused to permit her deputies to do the same, because her name was printed on those licenses, and she said to issue them would violate her Christian conscience. In the world of sports, ESPN commentator Chris Broussard, was loudly and roundly criticized for putting his Christian views on air over the 'coming out' of a gay athlete, Jason Collins.

The atmosphere has become poisonous. Matthew Staver, Dean and Professor of Law at Liberty University School of Law was quoted as saying, *"In a world of political correctness devoid of the rule of law, tolerance has come to mean total rejection of Christianity and moral standards. Modern tolerance redefines words like 'marriage,' 'discrimination,' 'equality,' 'morality,' and even 'absolutes.' The word 'tolerance' as it is used today never includes opposing arguments or competing worldviews. Tolerance has become Orwellian and decidedly intolerant."*² In other words, if your Christian beliefs run counter to the culture, you will be labeled narrow-minded, bigoted, ignorant and above all, intolerant. Which seems to be...well...fairly intolerant.

Greg Laurie, the senior pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, Calif., who led the May 2 National Day of Prayer, has recently been criticized for his position on homosexuality and found himself under pressure to step down. He didn't. He said, ***"We're in a time in our country now where I'm attacked because I believe what the Bible teaches."*** Louie Giglio, the pastor of Passion City Church in Roswell, Ga., was asked to offer the prayer at President Obama's 2012 inauguration ceremony. But because his biblical position on homosexuality caused an uproar among the gay community, he was later asked to step down. The charge of intolerance is not exclusive however, to the anti-Christian crowd. John Piper, the minister of Bethlehem Baptist Church of 33 years and founder of Desiring God Ministries, has been criticized by a Gordon Conwell seminary graduate, Dave Thompson, who claims to be a "conservative Christian" and says that Piper is *"wreaking havoc in our churches' pews, destroying families, and ultimately placing a banner of hate and hypocrisy over the front doors of our conservative faith churches."*³ for his biblical stance on homosexuality and 'so-called gay marriage'.³

On the one hand, it is hard to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous accusations like these and not wonder at a world gone mad and want to fight back. On the other hand, we should not be surprised by this. We should not be flabbergasted that Christians would be hated and vilified and unjustly accused. When asked if the current examples of intolerance to Christianity were shocking and unexpected, author and founder of Worldview Weekend, Brannon Howse responded, *'Not at all. Jesus said all nations will hate you. **If you are a Bible-minded believer such persecution should not be uncommon or a surprise,**'* he stated, quoting 2 Timothy 3:12 "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."⁴ He went on to say, *'Actually, if an individual who claims to be a Christian is not experiencing intolerance or persecution – being called names, belittled, marginalized, or characterized because you stand for sound theology – **you should examine yourself to make sure you are a Christian.**'*⁵

The founder of our faith taught His disciples exactly that. In the passage we read this morning, Jesus was teaching His disciples what it meant to be a Christian in the world. He was showing them that even though they were in the world, even though they were involved in the culture of the world, their standing as His people meant that they were actually to live counter to the world. He was showing them that to believe in Jesus meant that they would pass their days on this earth as a counterculture. In the parallel passage in Matthew 5 He says *'You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.'* In other words, Jesus was telling them that they were to be a counterculture community that showed the world the way God intended men to live. By our words and by our deeds we are to proclaim the truth of God's word in the world.

2 Growing Intolerance for Christianity in U.S., Christian Post, March 26, 2011

3 Dave Thompson, Why I Believe Pastors Should Support Jason Collins, Christian Post, May 4, 2013

4 Brannon Howse, Growing Intolerance for Christianity in U.S., Christian Post, March 26, 2011

5 Ibid.

Tolerance does not mean that we unreservedly accept all beliefs, or values or lifestyles or perceptions of truth as equally valid and true. Just a moments rational thought will tell you that not all truth claims can be true. Muslims believe that you must work your way to heaven. Buddhists don't believe in heaven. Hindus believe that what goes around comes around. Pantheists believe that everything is God. Christians believe that there is only one God and only one way to God. Oprah believes that there are many ways to God. Belief, in and of itself, does not make that belief true. Last August, Ravi Zacharias tweeted out that **'Truth cannot be sacrificed on the altar of pretended tolerance. Real tolerance is deference to all ideas, not indifference to the truth.'**¹⁶ Tolerance is gracious deference to ideas, opinions, behavior with which you don't agree, but you don't disengage either. Tolerance means that while you understand that there is truth with a capital 'T', not all people believe the truth or want the truth, and you respect that. And our job is not to force truth on people but to lovingly, consistently, perseveringly, engage the culture and live the truth out in Christian community.

You see we live in a paradox. Christians are accused of intolerance. And to a certain degree, our critics are correct. We believe in Jesus who said that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Buddha isn't the way. Allah isn't the truth. There is no life in Brahma, and God is not a rock or a tree. That is pretty intolerant. It is intolerant to say that there is only one true God and only one way to get to Him as Jesus tells us in John 17. But the people who accuse us of intolerance insist that their view of God is correct and they are the tolerant ones. And they are intolerant of anyone who claims differently. But the fact is, we all exercise fairly equal amounts of tolerance and intolerance every day. Most people would be intolerant with those who insist that two plus two equals seven. I would be very intolerant of the guy who gave me change based on wacky mathematics like that. I tolerate the guy that has to speed around me to gain a couple of seconds at the stoplight. But I'm not so tolerant of the guy that wants to use my lane in oncoming traffic.

The reality is that no one accepts all belief systems or values as equally true. We don't live like that. We can't live like that. Imagine if all airline pilots had their own definition of reality. I wouldn't be going anywhere on a plane if that were true. Tolerance and intolerance really only come into play when the question has to do with Christianity. We Christians are intolerant when we refuse to accept immoral behavior and we speak out against 'alternative' lifestyles like so-called 'gay marriage'. We are 'intolerant' when we speak out about the murder of pre-born children. We are 'intolerant' when we insist that you must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. But in doing that, we are only doing what Jesus did. Jesus was not tolerant of 'alternative lifestyles'. He confronted immoral behavior and had the audacity to tell people to stop sinning. He didn't accept all beliefs as equally true. In fact He told His followers to go and make disciples of all the nations, especially those who already had their own gods.

You see, ***the Christian community is deliberately counterculture.*** It always sets itself against the culture. As we saw last week, if you take any current cultural truth and turn it around 180 degrees, what you generally see is the Christian worldview. Christians believe that all life is sacred. Our culture says that only some lives are sacred and it legalizes the murder of those others. Christians believe that God defines marriage. Our culture says man defines marriage. Christians believe that God created the universe and everything in it. Our culture believes that the universe simply sprang into existence by itself. To be a Christian in this world means that you will inevitably find yourself on the flip side of your culture in all the categories that really matter.

This idea is all through the Bible, but it is most clearly expressed in Jesus' teaching in the gospels, and particularly here in Luke 6. Look at what Jesus says. **20 And He lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.** Right away Jesus focuses on cultural values. Blessed are the poor. He was not simply talking about those who are humble, as the parallel passage in Matthew 5 seems to indicate: **'Blessed are the poor in spirit...'** What Jesus is saying speaks to us on two levels. The first is blessed are those who understand this profound truth about themselves: the truth that we know our deep need of God; the truth that we understand that He has made us and we didn't make ourselves; the truth that we belong to Him and without His mercy in giving us life and breath and everything we wouldn't exist. Poor means we understand who God is and who we are. We understand that we are the poor.

The second thing is, based on that understanding, we know that material possessions are not the goal. Everything we have has been given first through His hand and we are therefore indebted by this grace to share our resources with those who do not have anything. Jesus is saying, 'Blessed are those who know their deep need of God and blessed are those who do not have great material possessions'. Jesus was not simply spiritualizing the word 'poor'. **He really meant poor people.** If you read through the gospels you understand that Jesus was incredibly concerned for the poor. He tells the young rich man who wants to follow Him: 'Sell all you have and give to the poor'. He teaches His disciples that 'when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame the blind'. When John the Baptist was wondering whether He was the Messiah, Jesus told his disciples to confirm that He was by the fact that, *'...the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.*

These are not the values of the culture around us. I don't know anyone who is not a Christian who says, 'Blessed are the poor'. No one believes that. Now if Jesus had said, 'Blessed are the rich' that would be a different story. People would applaud that. But He doesn't. And it gets worse. **21 "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.** Every aspect of this is counter to the culture: blessed are the starving and the crying and the hated and reviled. This is a community that is deeply countercultural. It is one in which there is massive concern for the poor and hungry and hurting. There is care and concern for the marginalized, and brutalized and societal cast offs. It's a community committed to humility and service and justice and love.

Jesus goes on to clarify the distinctions: **24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 "Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.** And when you look at this, you see a community that is extremely intolerant of those who live off others poverty and lack and misfortune without extending themselves to help. But you also see a community that is incredibly tolerant as well: **27 "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. 31 And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.**

Love those with whom you disagree. Do good to those who wish to do you harm. Respond kindly to those who speak evil to you. Intercede for those treat you badly. This is what a tolerant gospel community looks like. This is real tolerance. Love your enemy? The fact that he's an enemy implies that you disagree. It implies that the disagreement is such that you are at war with each other. And your job is to love them. What does that mean? How do we love our enemy? This goes beyond feeling good about them. You see love is not first of all an emotion. It is first of all an action. How good are you going to feel about someone who is your enemy; someone who hates you, who curses you, who abuses you? I don't think you can work up some good emotions about those people. That is why all these actions describe doing something. Loving, doing good, blessing, praying.

You've heard this quote by Dick Foth from me many times before, but you need to hear it again. **Love is the accurate estimation and the adequate supply of another's needs.**⁷ Love is an action. It is seeing and hearing beyond the rhetoric and actions of your enemy to his or her real need. Foth puts it in concrete terms: Love, as explained in John 3:16. *"For God so loved Richard Foth that he accurately estimated that he was a creep and he couldn't get it together, so He adequately provided a Redeemer in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth so that Foth could live with Him forever and know that he is loved."*⁸ You see, the deepest need of every man, woman and child is to know God. **Love is doing what it takes to bring them to God.** And it takes doing good to those who hate you. It takes blessing those who curse you for being so intolerant. It takes praying for those who mistreat you and insult you and say all kinds of bad things about you. I would submit that unless you are living this kind of countercultural life, you are not involved in a real gospel community.

7 Dick Foth, How To Build Healthy Relationships, February 10, 2008, National Community Church

8 Ibid.

Listen, this is the gospel. Jesus went to the cross for God-haters, God-revilers, God-cursers, God-abusers like you and me and everyone else who rejects Him. It is only when we realize that Jesus Christ has looked into my heart and seen the heart of an enemy, seen the heart of a mocker and reviler, and still embraced me with His infinite love and compassion that we will ever be able to live like this. You cannot simply summon up your determination to love your enemy and do it. You can't. We're not able to do it. Not until we experience the mercy and grace of God's love in our own hearts can we extend that mercy and grace and love to our most violent critics.

And don't make the mistake of thinking that if I do this, then the criticism will stop, then the name-calling will end, then the abuse will cease. That won't happen because this is irrevocably countercultural. Jesus says, **32** *"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.* We are called to love those who do not love us. We are called to do good to those who do not do good to us. We are called to give to those who do not give to us. And we are to do it without expecting anything in return. **35** *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return,*

Don't think that if you love your enemy, he will love you back. He may, and you will have introduced a former enemy to God. **But the emphasis here is not on his response but on your initiative** – you, love your enemy. Because the implication if you don't is sobering. Jesus goes on to say, *'...and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.* In other words, loving your enemies is not a condition for you to be a son of God. Loving your enemies means that you really are a son of God. You see that is the nature of our Father – to love His enemies. He loved His enemies enough send His Son to die for them. And the implication, if we are not loving our enemies that we are not sons of God, is sobering.

In this world of raging intolerance, we should not be either surprised or jaded by the reaction of the world's response to our faith. Jesus told us this would be our lot. *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation [pressure, affliction, trouble]. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* What the world needs to see is a truly countercultural community that is demonstrating the kind of enemy-embracing love that can only come from heaven. We don't need more and better arguments. We don't need to win the culture war. We need, as Jesus tells us, to *'Be merciful, even as your Father in heaven is merciful'*. Mercy is not giving the other person what they deserve. Be like your Father who did not give you what you deserve for your rebellion and sin, but demonstrated His love for you, His enemy, by giving His Son to die on a cross to make an enemy His friend.

Our gracious God and loving Father,

Help us to live in this world as sons of the Most High, loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us and praying for those who abuse us. Grant that we would live so as to show the world a community of people who are committed to humility and service and justice and love. A people of God who care deeply for the marginalized, and brutalized, who love the poor and the hungry and the hurting in concrete and practical ways. Let the mercy You have shown us temper our response to insult and injury and may the gospel of Jesus Christ shine through our lives in the way we live, we pray in the precious name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.