

TOLERANCE vs. CONDEMNATION

TOLERANCE IS MAKING ALLOWANCES FOR THOSE WHO LACK WISDOM OR MATURITY AND PRAYING THAT THEY WILL SEE AND FOLLOW GOD'S WAYS.

“Thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth” (Psalm 86:15).

DEFINITION OF TOLERANCE

In a technical sense, tolerance refers to the acceptable amount of variation from a standard. In medical terms, tolerance means the ability of the body to withstand the effects of things detrimental to good health (e.g., extreme cold or heat, drugs, or unhealthy foods). In medical terms, tolerance means the ability of the body to withstand the effects of things detrimental to good health (e.g., extreme cold or heat, drugs, or unhealthy foods). In mechanics, tolerance means the difference between the allowable maximum and minimum sizes of a mechanical part. In every area, tolerance requires limits. To violate those limits results in dangerous consequences, because it is not being used for the purpose for which the creator designed it.

In relating to people, tolerance presupposes a precise standard of thinking and conduct that can evaluate other ideas and behavior. Truth and fact must form the basis for such a standard. To form a conclusion or opinion without knowing all the relevant facts leads to prejudice. “He who gives an answer before he hears, It is folly and shame to him,” (Proverbs 18:13, New American Standard). To cling to ideas which disregard or contradict the facts amounts to bigotry. “A poor, yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction,” (Ecclesiastes 4:13-14, New American Standard).

A parallel Biblical word to tolerance is *longsuffering*. The Greek word most commonly translated *longsuffering* is *makrothumia*, which means “forbearance or fortitude.”

TOLERANCE FOR BELIEVERS

Scripture makes a sharp distinction between the amount of tolerance believers should show toward each other and the tolerance they should show toward those who are unbelievers. Every true believer is a member of the Body of Christ. (See Romans 12:4-5).

This Scriptural connection between the members of the Body of Christ occurs when a person becomes a believer. Communion was established by Jesus Christ as a time of regular examination to make sure that every believer is living in harmony with the standards of God's Word and is in fellowship with every other believer. Such an examination is vital for the health of the Body of Christ, because as Paul pointed out, “...there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it,” (I Corinthians 12:25-27, New American Standard).

The bonding and interaction that takes place between believers is powerfully affirmed in Paul's warning not to have immoral relationships. “Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit,” (I Corinthians 6:15-17).

Because of the need for conformity to God's standards and for each member to demonstrate sincere love for each other, God has set up a structure of leadership in His church to strengthen the Body and also exercise discipline with those members who refuse to live by God's standards. When Biblical discipline is administered through a local church, all the members of the Body are to support it. Therefore, the instructions are given, “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat,” (I Corinthians 5:11).

Because every believer is affected by what one believer does, the Bible gives a series of “one another” commands designed “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

TOLERANCE TOWARD UNBELIEVERS

A believer is to have a greater tolerance for unbelievers than he has for fellow believers. Paul explains this in the same passage in which he warns believers not to have fellowship with other believers who violate God’s standards. “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world,” (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person,” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).

A distinction must be made between unbelievers who violate the laws of the land and those who simply express opinions or actions contrary to God’s ways. Crimes against society are not to be tolerated because a community will have as much crime as the neighborhood tolerates. Three times in Scripture, law officers are called the “ministers of God” for doing good and all citizens are to support and encourage them in their work of maintaining law and order. (See Rom. 13:1-7).

HOW TO SHOW TOLERANCE

Tolerance is looking beyond the wrong ideas and behavior of a people and seeing the needs and struggles in their lives. One who is tolerant is more concerned about showing love to people than convincing them of the error of their ways.

To tolerate people means to not argue with them. This is consistent with the instruction of Scripture. “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful,” (II Timothy 2:24, New International Version). We are also to avoid foolish and unlearned questions, which produce unprofitable debate.

GOD’S NARROW TOLERANCE THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Each time God establishes a new era in history, He lays down laws for its success and requires total adherence to those laws.

1. Tolerance in Creation

God gave Adam and Eve full freedom to investigate and discover everything in their environment except one item—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He warned them that harmony with Him and creation required zero tolerance of partaking of the fruit of this tree. The very moment they violated this standard, they and all those who came from them experienced the consequences of sin and death. (See Gen. 1-2).

2. Tolerance with the Mosaic Law

When God gave Moses His laws and statutes, He required strict adherence to each one, because they were the basis of the health and prosperity of the nation. Moses said, “Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for?” (Deuteronomy 4:5-7). Therefore, when a man was found breaking God’s Law by picking up sticks on the Sabbath Day, he was brought into custody. Moses asked God what they should do, and God replied, “The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp,” (Numbers 15:35).

3. **Tolerance in the New Testament Church**

The spirit of love and sacrifice was so strong in the first-century church that many of the believers sold their possessions and distributed the money through the apostles to the poor and needy. When Ananias and Sapphira secretly determined to give the public appearance of generosity but retained part of the proceeds of the sale of their property, God did not tolerate such dishonesty. In fact, through Peter, He rebuked them for lying to God, and struck them dead. (See Acts 5:4-5).

- Because the laws of God and the laws of nature are constant, those who violate them will experience the predicted results. Every deed and word will be judged according to the laws of the harvest. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting,” (Galatians 6:7-8).

THE TOLERANCE OF POSTPONED CONSEQUENCES

Although God cannot tolerate the violation of His laws, He can, upon repentance, postpone the temporal consequences of those violations. “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4, New American Standard). God also postpones judgment to demonstrate His power and the riches of His grace. “What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory” (Rom. 9:22).

THE NEED AND PURPOSE OF TOLERANCE

One of the consistent traits of human nature is to be intolerant of the faults in other people that are similar to our own weaknesses. Therefore, the need for tolerance in others should be viewed as God’s motivation for us to examine ourselves in that same area and correct any deficiencies, so that we can clearly and lovingly see how to help others.

1. **Israel’s rejection of the Promised Land**

When the nation of Israel refused to enter the Promised Land, God determined to destroy them. However, Moses appealed to God to be longsuffering and have tolerance. God listened to Moses but stated that all those who rebelled would die and that only their children would see the land. (See Numbers 14:11-30).

2. **David’s sin with Bathsheba**

When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then killed her husband in an attempt to cover it up, God forgave David when he repented. David praised God for His tolerance. “Thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth” (Ps. 86:15).

However, the temporal consequences of David’s sin were still to come. God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David, and through him God said that the sword would never depart from David’s house, and his wives would be given to his neighbor and he would lie with them publicly. “And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die” (II Sam. 12:9-14).

3. **Nineveh’s corruption by wickedness**

The great city of Nineveh is remembered for its corruption and cruelty. Therefore, God determined to destroy it. When Jonah warned the people that judgment would come in forty days, they all repented in sackcloth and ashes. God heard their cry and withheld destruction for over one hundred years. (See Jonah 3:4-9).

God postpones the consequences of sin in order to motivate those who are breaking His laws to repent and turn back to His ways.

HOW TOLERANT ARE YOU?

- Do you view each person as an individual rather than as a member of a race, culture, or group?
- Do you evaluate ideas and behavior based on the laws of nature and God's Law?
- Do you make allowances for those who are not as wise and mature as they should be?
- When you see faults in others does it motivate you to be an example of Godly living before them?
- Do you look for common ground with people of different viewpoints and behavior rather than focusing on differing opinions and standards?
- Do you make greater allowances for unbelievers than you do for believers?
- Do you remind yourself that tolerance is based on God's right to rule His world and that He has not given that right to anyone outside His delegated authorities?
- Do you serve people regardless of their viewpoints and ask God to change those who need changing?