

# ...because Christians are so Intolerant

Good morning. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to Luke 19. If you're new around here, we're spending six weeks working through a series called *I Just Can't Believe*, which is all about the more common obstacles and objections that people have to faith in Jesus. So far, we've talked about a number of different intellectual and philosophical hang-ups that people tend to have when it comes to Christianity.

But this week and next week, as we close out the series, **we're moving on to a couple topics that are a little less intellectual and philosophical, and more *relational***. They're less about *ideas* and more about *people*. **For many people we know, the issues they have with Christianity are more about the actions and behavior of *Christians***. Things that Christians do, or don't do, or do badly, or say, or whatever the case may be. So for this week and next, we're going to focus on two objections of *that* sort.

And *today specifically*, we're covering a one objection that most of us have probably heard a good bit: *the objection people have due to the intolerance of Christians*. **Increasingly in Western society, Christians are perceived as being *intolerant of many other groups of people***. If you've tuned into the news or social media *ever in your life*, you've probably heard people level that accusation about Christians. People often get the impression that to be a Christian is to be intolerant of all sorts of people who are different than you. So today, we're going to be considering the ideas of tolerance and intolerance.

Now, in order to *do* that, as a heads up, we're going to have to do a good bit of legwork before we get to our passage. Just for you to know, especially if you're new, that's not how we prefer to teach the Scriptures here on Sunday. We much *prefer* to just open to a passage in the bible, walk through that passage little by little, and then talk about what it all means. We don't generally like to do 15+ minutes of social commentary before we *get* to our passage—this isn't a TED Talk, after all. But occasionally, we come across a topic like the one we're tackling today, where, there are just a lot of things going on culturally, that we need to examine and deconstruct, in order for us to see more fully why the Scriptures are so helpful on this subject. We've sort of got to clear some of the weeds out of the way, so we can hear loud and clear what the Scriptures say as a result. So it'll take us a bit to get to Luke 19, but we will get there eventually.

First up, we need figure out what people mean when they use the word *intolerance*. Sometimes, when people use that word to describe Christians, they're thinking of the really obvious, extreme examples of it like you see in the news: examples of people committing violence or *inciting* violence towards other groups of people, *in the name of* the God of the bible. For instance, just a few months back, right here in our city, a Knoxville pastor (who was also a detective with the police) preached a sermon where he quite literally called for the execution of people who are gay.<sup>1</sup> That is not only *intolerance*, but one of the *least* Jesus-like things I've ever heard a pastor say. In 2015, a man who claimed to be inspired by his religious beliefs, walked into a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs and started shooting, killing three people and injuring nine.<sup>2</sup> There are plenty of examples out there, if you're looking for them, of Christians using their faith as justification for behavior like this type of hatred and violence, whether it's the LGBTQ community, or certain people's lifestyles or choices, or even other religions and faith traditions. I think *sometimes*, that's what people are referring to when they say Christians are intolerant.

But if you're paying attention, you may have also noticed that a lot of people use the word "intolerance" a little differently than that. Generally speaking, if your non-Christian co-worker calls you "intolerant," they probably don't mean they think you are going to shoot up a Planned Parenthood clinic any day now. They usually mean something a little more *subtle* than that. I'll give you a first-hand example. A while back, when I was working at a church in South Carolina, we had a couple come around, and they were interested in becoming members of our church. This couple had been dating for a couple months, and had moved in together. So before they signed up for the membership class there, they emailed me and asked the question "do you think it's sinful that we are living together?" Keep in mind—I had never even *met* these people. Rather aggressive question. So I responded as gently as I knew how: I told them, first off, that I would love to grab coffee with them to hear more about their story, hear more about their relationships with Jesus, and hear more about their relationship with one another and what the motives were for living together. But I said that if they just wanted the blunt biblical answer to that question, if they consider themselves followers of Jesus, they are called to 'flee sexual immorality,' and that living together couldn't really be considered 'fleeing.' So yes, it was sinful.

And their response to that email of mine was to say—and I'm quoting here—"see? This is why nobody wants to be a Christian anymore, because Christians are so *intolerant* of

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<sup>1</sup> You can read the story [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> You can read the story [here](#).

people's lifestyles." And then I wrote back, "so, no coffee?" Now whatever you *personally* think about my answer to them, just think about their statement *to me* for just a second. Because I didn't put them on *blast*. I didn't single them out in front of other people. I didn't call for their public shaming or their execution. I didn't refuse to be friends with them—in fact, quite the opposite. I said I *wanted* to grab coffee with them to get to know them better. All that happened was that they asked me a bible question as a pastor: *is this sin?* And I gave them a bible answer. And then they told me that, because my answer differed from their belief, that I was being "intolerant." Now, do you see how *that* definition of "intolerance" is actually a little different? No one is harming anybody, no one is calling for violence against anybody. We just disagree on the answer to a question.

But I think that interaction demonstrates a *shift* that has occurred in our society as to how we think about tolerance and intolerance. Such that we now have an *old* tolerance—what tolerance *used to*—and a *new* tolerance—what most people mean when they use the word now. **Old tolerance** meant **accepting the existence of different perspectives**. So being tolerant meant that, if I'm a Christian, and you are Muslim, we can fundamentally disagree about some very important things, but we can still live alongside one another in society and respect one another, without harming or killing one another, or berating one another with insults. That's what tolerance *used to* mean. But around the 1960s, the cultural definition of *tolerance* began to shift. And it *has* shifted, to where *today*, **new tolerance** actually means something altogether different. *Today*, tolerance means **affirming the correctness of different perspectives**. So being tolerant *today* means that if I'm a Christian, and you are Muslim, you're not allowed to think *I'm* wrong and I'm not allowed to think *you're* wrong about God. Because to believe you're wrong would be to have a "phobia" of you.<sup>3</sup> Put simply, **tolerance is no longer just about accepting people with different beliefs. It now requires affirming the beliefs themselves**. It *requires* you to say that another person's beliefs are every bit as true as yours. So with the couple at the church in South Carolina: it turns out what they wanted was not *my* answer to *their* question. What they wanted was for me to *agree with their answer to their* question. And because I didn't, they accused me of being intolerant.

But I think it's worth *dissecting* this *new* definition of tolerance just a little bit. Because I think it's actually somewhat *problematic* as a worldview—not just for Christians, but for anybody who genuinely tries to live it out practically. And I think it's problematic because it operates out of at least two faulty assumptions:

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of this understanding of tolerance, reference Bernie Sanders' objections to Russel Vought's faith in his confirmation hearing, dissected in detail [here](#).

**Assumption #1** is that “**accepting someone means approving of everything that they do.**” So again, with the couple I emailed with, their understanding of tolerance assumed that if I didn’t affirm that particular aspect of their life together, I was being intolerant of them. The assumption made *often* in our society is that if you tell someone that *anything* they are doing is morally wrong—if you *disapprove* of their actions in any way—you are being *intolerant* or *hateful towards* them. Here’s the problem with that assumption: I don’t think we actually believe that at a functional level.

For instance, even at a personal level, my wife Ana *disapproves* of a *lot* of things that I do. And I mean a *lot*. She disapproves of the fact that I have never once in our entire marriage taken it upon myself to clean the bathrooms in our house. Never once. She disapproves of the fact that I sometimes eat Captain D’s because for some inexplicable reason that I can’t defend to you, I like their food. Even a more serious note, she disapproves of how some nights, I just go get in bed and turn on Netflix before she and I have even gotten a chance to talk. She disapproves of how I sometimes put my job ahead of her and our family. She disapproves of how sometimes I put my own comfort and desires ahead of her. Ana disapproves of *all* of those things, and more things than that. But let me ask you: does any of that mean she’s being *rejecting* me as a *person*? Does that mean she’s being *intolerant* of me? No, not at all. She actually very much *tolerates* me as a person—much to my and everyone else’s surprise. In fact, she not only *tolerates* me—she *loves* me. She *accepts* me. But her loving and accepting me doesn’t mean blindly affirming every single thing that I do. In fact, sometimes her loving me means *engaging* me on the things I do that she doesn’t approve of.

So listen, I cannot think of a more relevant and timely thing for us to grasp, with our society being the way it is right now. Let me give you a quick peace of advice: **if another person disagrees with you about something, they are *not* your enemy. They do not hate you, and you do not hate them. If someone disagrees with you, they are another human being deserving of dignity and respect, who you happen to disagree with.** Does that make sense? We have got to grasp this if we are going to create the type of peaceful and accepting society that we all want to live in together. // But all of that to say, tolerance does not mean approving of and agreeing with everything that somebody does. You can fully disagree with someone about things and fully love them at the same time: those are not opposed to one another. That’s the first faulty assumption that the new tolerance operates on. Here’s the second one...

**Assumption #2** is that “**everyone should be tolerant of everyone’s perspective.**” People in our society assume that we can create a world where everyone is tolerant of

everything. That every single person should be tolerant of every perspective there is. But truth be told, even the most tolerant of people don't *functionally* believe that. For example, even the most *tolerant of people* out there aren't making the argument that we should affirm the right of white supremacists to continue shooting minorities in our country. Even the most *tolerant of people* aren't arguing that we should affirm the right of the terrorists on September 11 to fly planes into buildings. No—those people get hunted down, prosecuted, and punished accordingly. **Every society that has ever existed has drawn the line somewhere on what they will and won't tolerate.** That's the whole reason for having a justice system: because we need to be able to say collectively as a society, "some things will not be *tolerated* here."

And inversely, consider for a second that **some of the most incredible, most liberating movements in human history have been prompted by an *intolerance* of something.** Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous *I Have a Dream Speech*, called for a holy *intolerance* of racial inequality in our country. The Holocaust was brought to an end, in part, by people who were *intolerant* of the actions of the Nazi Regime. The movement in our country to allow women to vote was motivated by an *intolerance* of the fact that half of our population had no say-so in who was elected to lead them. **Virtually every time that society has moved forward on a humanitarian front, it has been because a group of people refused to *tolerate* some type of injustice. If you insist that everyone be tolerant of everything, you actually bring progress to a screeching halt.** So I would argue, and you thought about it, you probably would too, that there *are certain things* that should *not* be *tolerated*.

And then lastly—and maybe most glaringly—this assumption doesn't work because it's actually *self-defeating*. For you to say "everyone must be tolerant of everything," do you know who you're being *intolerant* of? You're being intolerant of *intolerant people*. You're actually *doing* the thing you're saying nobody is *allowed* to do. So not only is that perspective ineffective for fighting injustice, it's actually impossible to live up to. **You can't make the whole world *tolerant* without being *intolerant* of certain groups of people.**

Now, I want to be very clear: none of this justifies intolerance in *all* of its forms—not one bit. It's simply to make the point that *absolute tolerance* is actually *impossible*. Being completely tolerant is a contradiction in terms. It's a *myth*. It's an unachievable goal. **The great irony is that by the new definition of tolerance, we're *all* actually intolerant.** Do you see that? If tolerance means having to affirm the validity of all differing

perspectives from your own—we are *all* actually intolerant of *somebody*. So the whole idea just starts to break down if you press it much at all.

So here's where I'd land: in light of *that*, maybe the question we should be asking is not "how do we affirm and agree with every perspective that differs from our own?". Maybe that's actually the wrong question. Maybe the question we *should* be asking is "how should we *treat* those we disagree with and disapprove of?" It seems to *me* like that would be a far more productive question to ask.

And *that* is a question that the bible speaks to, loud and clear. **Consistently and repeatedly, the Scriptures tell us that as followers of Jesus, we are to love, befriend, and extend hospitality to those we disagree with, and disapprove of.** And one place we see this laid out really *plainly* is in Jesus' interactions with a man named Zacchaeus. So now we're finally to our passage. Take a look with me at Luke 19, starting in v. 1:

*[1] He [that's Jesus] entered [a city named] Jericho and was passing through. [2] And behold, there was a man named **Zacchaeus** [who was a wee little man. If you grew up in Sunday school, you know all about that. If you *didn't*, don't worry about it; Christians are v weird]. He [also] was a **chief tax collector and was rich.***

Okay let's stop right there for a second. It's easy for you and I to miss if we don't know the context, but the author just told us that this guy, Zacchaeus, is about as suspect as they come. A tax collector in that day wasn't just like an ancient equivalent of somebody who worked for the I.R.S.—although that alone would be enough to scare *some of us* away. A tax collector back then was basically a traitor to their own people. They had sold their soul to the oppressive, occupying Roman government, by agreeing to collect taxes on their behalf. And the Romans *already* charged the Jewish people exorbitant amounts of taxes. But then on top of that, tax collectors were permitted to *inflate* the tax rates they charged people, in order to turn more of a profit for themselves. But then they could *enforce* these inflated rates at the point of a sword. And because the passage says Zacchaeus was "rich," we can reasonably infer that he is inflating *his* rates a *good bit*.

I tell you all of that to help you see that **it would've been hard to find somebody that the Jewish people more strongly disagreed with and disapproved of than Zacchaeus.** And as a result, he was likely regularly shunned and excluded by his people. People were *intolerant*—if you want to use that word here—of Zacchaeus. Which actually explains the next part of the story. Keep reading with me, in v. 3:

*[3] And he [Zacchaeus] was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. [4] So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.*

Now some of us are probably under the impression that he climbs up in the tree because he is *short*. And that's certainly true to *some* extent—the passage does say that. But the point of the story isn't just to say "Jesus loves short people too!" or something like that. There's something *deeper* going on too. After all, even shorter people can break into a crowd if the crowd will let them. Right? Like if you are at a concert that is standing room only, and you care little enough what other people think of you, you can make your way to the front. But Zacchaeus didn't have that ability. Remember, he was *hated*, he was *shunned* by the people. If he tried to break his way through to see Jesus, he might well have been attacked and trampled as a result. Nobody liked him, nobody wanted to be around him, so nobody was going to make room for him. It wasn't *just* that he was *short*, he was also *excluded* and *hated*. So he has to climb up in a tree. And it works—look at v. 5 with me:

*[5] And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for **I must stay at your house today.**" [6] So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.*

So Jesus sees an immoral person who has been shunned and excluded by everyone around him, and what does he do? *Includes* him. He shoes Zacchaeus a special level of acceptance, in front of all the people he's been *excluded by*. Now, we know that Jesus is not doing this because he *approves* of Zacchaeus' way of life or chosen profession. Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name, which means he is aware on some level of who he is and what he does: he's a rich man who takes advantage of the poor. Does that *sound* like the type of guy that Jesus would approve of? Not at all: do you remember how *strongly* Jesus went *after* the rich man in our passage last week? Jesus certainly doesn't approve of Zaccheus' lifestyle. But does Jesus *lead* with that? Does Jesus start off by making sure Zacchaeus knows that Jesus disapproves of his lifestyle. Does Jesus picket Zacchaeus' house? Does he write angry blogs that target Zacchaeus' behavior. *No*. Instead, **how does Jesus treat this person that he fundamentally disagrees with and disapproves of? Dinner.** He invites himself over for dinner.

Now, *that's* a somewhat different approach compared to most of our society today, is it not? When's the last time you heard someone say "yeah, I disagree with this person

when it comes some very important, fundamental things...so obviously, we get dinner together once a week and try to learn from one another.” Yeah, we don’t really *do* that. It’s more like “yeah, I disagree with this person so obviously I retweeted the stupid thing they said and sicced all my followers on them.” But Jesus’ approach to those he disagrees with and disapproves of is *entirely* different. His approach to them is radical *inclusion*, despite his differences with them. Interesting.

But as you might expect, not everybody is a fan of Jesus’ method. Keep reading, v. 7:

[7] And when **they** saw it [presumably that refers to all the other people witnessing this exchange], **they all grumbled**, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a **sinner**.”

They *grumble* at Jesus for doing this. And let me just go ahead and tell you: **if you choose to truly go Jesus’ route of radical inclusion, people will grumble at you too**. If you spend time regularly with the people with people who don’t know Jesus, you might want to prepare for religious people to ask you questions like “well does that person know that you disapprove of their lifestyle?” If you go hang out with that co-worker that nobody likes, and other co-workers see you, bet *money* you’ll get some glares. If you associate with the person in your class that annoys everybody and asks too many questions, I assure you there will be some people that will throw some shade. There *may be people* call you names, might *accuse* you of things, who exclude *you* as a result. And here’s why: because you’re going against the grain of how the world operates. The way of the world is to draw boundary lines: “these people are in, these people are out. If you decide to befriend someone that you shouldn’t include, we will *exclude you*.”

And that’s what happens to *Jesus*: people *grumble* at him. Jesus doesn’t abide by their “who’s in and who’s out” societal expectations. He goes to spend intentional time with someone *they disapprove* of. *They* think that the way we should treat people we disapprove of is to *shun* them. Jesus thinks we should have dinner with them.

But Jesus is onto something apparently. As a result, here’s what happens—v. 8:

[8] And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded **anyone of anything**, I restore it **fourfold**.” [9] And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house,



*since he also is a son of Abraham. [10] For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

So notice, as a result of Jesus’ radical inclusion of Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus owns up to his sin. He offers to give half of his fortune to the poor, and offers to pay back anything he has defrauded people of *four times over*. So **as a result of Jesus’ befriending Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus’ behavior changes**. Do you see that? But notice that it doesn’t happen the *other way around*. Jesus doesn’t say “Zacchaeus, if you change your behavior—if you align your beliefs with mine—*then*, I will accept you and befriend you. *Then* I’ll have dinner with you.” He accepts and befriends him, and then as a *result* of that *friendship*, Zacchaeus’ behavior changes. Do you see the importance of those sequence of events?

And this is the way the gospel *works*. **The gospel starts with God’s compassion towards us through Jesus, and then creates changed lives and habits and behaviors as a result**. Plenty of people—people who claim to be Christians—get that precisely *backwards*. **Often, we expect people’s behavior to be distinctly *Christian*, when they’re not even Christians yet. We expect them to act like Jesus when they haven’t yet encountered Jesus yet**. We expect people who don’t follow Jesus, to act like Jesus followers. But that makes no sense: if they haven’t encountered the love and grace of Jesus, why would their lives look like someone who *has*? That’s to radically misunderstand how the good news of Jesus works in a person’s life.

And to be honest with you, I think this is one of the reasons people think Christians are intolerant: we expect people to act like Christians who *aren’t* Christians. We expect everyone in the world to hold the same values we do—to adhere to the same moral standards we do—before they’ve even encountered the compassion of Jesus that would *lead* to all of that. And **when we expect that, we end up communicating that people need to change their behavior before they can become a Christian**. Which is the exact *opposite* of the good news of Jesus. The good news of Jesus is that trusting in *him*, is what leads to a changed life. Does that make sense?

**If we want to model our lives after Jesus, we lead with compassion**. We lead with grace and radical inclusion. We lead with the good news of Jesus that seeks us out and meets us where we are. The gospel that transforms the way we *think* about ourselves. And then from *there*, we help people learn how to follow Jesus step by step. From there, we walk *with* them as they learn how to re-orient how they think about money, and sex, and possessions, and life, and relationships, and everything else. But that all happens as

a response to the grace of Jesus in their lives. Not as a prerequisite for it. **If you are in the room today, and you force people to change their behavior before you will include them, here's the problem: you've actually forgotten who you were.** You've actually forgotten how Jesus accepted you. You've misremembered something about the compassion of Jesus in your own life. You've forgotten what Jesus did for you—namely, that he showed you compassion and inclusion *before* you changed, not *after*. You've forgotten that on one level or another, you *were* Zacchaeus, and Jesus accepted you freely. And it was only *after* he accepted you that your behavior changed. Not the other way around.

And for all of our talk of tolerance and acceptance, I think *grace* is what we actually *want*: we want a love that *accepts us* just as we are. Someone that will show *compassion* to us as we are. But we don't want a love that *leaves us* as we are. I mean, I don't know about you, but I don't want to struggle with all the same things I struggle with now, five years from now. I don't want to be just as broken and flawed as I am now, five years from now. Sure, I want to be *accepted* just as I am, but I don't want to *stay* just as I am. I want to grow, I want to mature, I want to become a more *healthy*, a more *whole* human being. I want to *love people* better five years from now than I do now.

**And if those things are going to happen, if I'm going to *grow*, I need something better than *tolerance*—I need God's *transformative grace*. I need a love that *accepts me exactly where I am, but doesn't leave me exactly where I am.*** And that is the type of acceptance that the gospel offers. The type of compassion that accepts an immoral tax collector, just as he is, and sits down to dinner with him. But the type of transformative grace that doesn't leave him there.

I wonder what would happen if all of us who are followers of Jesus, treated people we disagree with like *that*. If we treated people we disapprove of like *that*. I wonder what would happen if we followed the example of *radical inclusion*. I wonder how many “tax collectors” today would be transformed from the inside out. I wonder how many people's perceptions of Christianity would be changed. So together, as followers of Jesus, let's offer something even better than tolerance—let's offer transformative grace from Jesus, that loves people where they're at, and changes them from the inside out.

So just real quickly, before we're done: I want to just ask you one question: who are you withholding acceptance from? Who in your life are you expecting to change their behavior—to adjust their actions—before you will love and accept them. Who are you withholding God's transformative grace from? Maybe it's one particular person, maybe

it's a *group* of people. Maybe it's somebody you know really well, that you're in relationship with—or maybe it's just a certain *type* of people that exist out there in the world, and you can't imagine accepting them because of their lifestyle or their choices or their beliefs? But I'd just love for us to ask ourselves, who are we withholding acceptance from, right now? Because whoever it is, and however great the distance between you is—and it might be *great*—here's one thing I can assure you: it's not greater than the distance was between you and God. And Jesus came to “seek and save the lost.” That includes you, that includes *me*, and it includes whoever you're withholding acceptance from this morning.

Let's pray.