

Tolerance has come to be defined as open mindedness, acceptance of all with no exceptions. In John 14:6 Jesus makes this famous claim, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." His words were very clear; there is only one path to God, his words were not hollow, his claim was backed up by a life whose purpose was in his own words "to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). Indeed Jesus' claim is difficult to deal with; he has left no other way and he has left no room for dissenting opinions. This is precisely what he intended in making an absolute statement.

Many by the modern understanding of tolerance would write Jesus off as a narrow minded bigot. If tolerance is accepting any and all beliefs as equal then indeed Jesus is very intolerant. In Romans 2:4 Paul describes God as both patient and tolerant in a passage describing God's ability to judge humanity. Paul's definition of tolerance differs from the modern form. Paul warns against humans casting judgment upon each other but upholds God's right to do so because God's judgment is "based on truth" (Romans 2:2). Paul's definition of tolerance therefore has to do with accepting people while at the same time opposing wrong actions and beliefs.

The crux of Paul's argument is the definition of right and wrong. Paul espouses the Christian view which claims that God created the world and humanity and He alone is truth and therefore right and wrong is defined only by God. Opponents of this view elevate human opinion above all else; right and wrong are arbitrary and vary based on an individual's unique opinion and belief; in short this is called humanism. Proponents of humanism are often seen as champions of tolerance, they strive to accept all people no matter what they believe. They see Christianity as intolerant because of absolute claims that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23) and "no one comes to the Father except through me," they find it offensive that any individual should be subjected to another's definition of right and wrong, even if it is from God.

I hope that upon reflection it is easy to see the holes in the argument that I just described. How can it be possible to claim all things are equal and then rule out anything? It is logical that those who wish to see themselves above God would naturally loath the idea of God having any say over their actions, so I understand why that stance would be taken. The problem is if in fact God actually did create the world and does define right and wrong then it is up to him, not humanity to define truth.

Tolerance in our modern time has become synonymous with progressive liberalism whereby any action or belief is permissible. This of course only makes sense if one believes that when it comes down to it there is no absolute truth. If this were the case then an individual could define truth for themselves. But if truth exists beyond the individual then a different definition of tolerance must be offered. Tolerance becomes an accepting of people who have different beliefs, but not wavering in what is true; not acceptance of the differing belief if it is wrong by God's standard.

To return to Paul's description of God in Romans 2, God is tolerant because he continues to love and accept humanity though humanity is sinful and rejects Him. This is real tolerance; God does not bend the rules of truth or validate wrong beliefs or actions, but he offers grace and love to all without exception. The question we must answer is what is truth? Does it come from oneself or from God? I find myself a sinner in rebellion of God, yet He has extended me grace. It is for this reason that I can interact with those around me no matter what their belief and love, because He loved me first.