

“The True Gift”

Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 6:15-23

June 11, 2023

I want you to imagine just for one moment that you’ve got a dear friend named Pete. Now Pete is a perfectly nice and respectable fellow. He holds a job, pays his taxes. He’s witty, engaging, friendly. He’s just about everything you’d want in a friend. There’s just one problem with Pete. Pete’s a compulsive jaywalker. He gets a thrill from walking out into traffic where there’s not any legal crossing. You know this about Pete, to be sure. You’ve seen the bandages and the bruises from time to time. You visited him in the hospital once when he broke a leg after being hit by a car. It was there that you gently asked Pete if he ought to consider finding himself a safer hobby. He replied – “But I love jaywalking. If I couldn’t jaywalk, then I just don’t think I’d be able to fully express who I am.” When he said those words, you knew something was amiss but you couldn’t quite put your finger on what so you decided to let it slide. Pete’s your dear friend and you want to make him happy.

Happiness is, after all, one of our primary ends as citizens of the United States of America. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that’s what the Declaration of Independence states. So, we have lots of liberties. A plethora of societally approved ways to pursue happiness and those avenues are growing by the second whether they should or not.

Should anyone or any organization question somebody else’s pursuit of happiness? More often than not, one of the first words they’ll hear lobbed in their direction is tolerance. “You’ve got to be tolerant” those voices will say as though it was our primary objective in life. Tolerance is the nearly exclusionary virtue promoted by modern society. It’s a fair question to ask – Why do we espouse tolerance so much?

Well, the first reason is most likely because tolerance doesn’t cost us very much. It’s far easier to be tolerant than it is to be engaged. I mean, I can sit back and tolerate anyone and anything from the confines of my living room without lifting a finger.

Tolerance is valued also because we can’t stand, nor should we approve of its opposite...intolerance. Who hasn’t withered under the lash of intolerance? As we all know, intolerance can lead to unkind words all the way up to unspeakable acts of violence.

I ought to point out that the Bible does advocate tolerance through its usage of the word forbearance. Forbearance is somewhat akin to tolerance so tolerance isn’t without ample Biblical endorsement. At the same time, it should be noted that, in the Biblical sense, tolerance has a different meaning than I think we’d give it. Biblically, “*Forbearance*” could be explained as showing patience, even though something is owed to us. It’s controlling oneself when provoked or offended. Its synonyms show us some of the nuances of *forbearance*: “patience, leniency and yes, tolerance.”

So yes, Biblically, the word can mean tolerance and it’s promoted by the Lord our God as a good thing. But it’s never to be the case that we practice such tolerance in a Biblically uninformed manner or without the infusion by of other Christian attributes into it like love and holiness. In fact, practicing tolerance apart from a Biblical understanding of it can lead us towards being some pretty mixed-up Christians. Recently, a good friend of mine who happens to be a pastor in another denomination proudly posted an article from another pastor in his denomination. Now the pastor I’m speaking of has gotten his feet held to the fire by others within his denomination. “Why?” you ask - because he placed a stone statue of Krishna, a Hindu deity, on the grounds of his church. Now in the article, this pastor writes a well-meaning defense of his actions in respect to the statue. Prominently mentioned in the article is our Western virtue in chief – tolerance. It isn’t the case that people in his denomination think that Hindus are evil, rather they understand the Bible. Thou shall have no other gods before me...and they think that means something.

So, what do we do with tolerance when it leads us to error? What do we do when our pursuit of tolerance puts on an opposite path than the Bible would have us take? To return to our illustration about Pete – what do we do with Pete? Do we continue tolerating his jaywalking flat-out knowing that no good end will come of it?

Hear again Romans 6:23 – “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

Let’s look at the first part of the passage. “*For the wages of sin is death.*” If this were put into a logical proposition it would mean that the consequent of sin is death. And here Paul doesn’t mean just the earthly

death we all experience although that's part of it. So too does Paul have in view the eternal death which comes from not being in Christ.

As I've said numerous times, the Bible isn't "soft on sin" to coin a phrase. Believe me when I tell you this, there isn't a chapter or verse, not a jot or a tittle, in which the Word of God tolerates sin. Yes, the wrongdoer is forgiven. Yes, the transgressor is justified in Christ through faith. Yes, God loves sinner BUT GOD HATES THE SIN. So, if you infer for one single second that God, in His love, is tolerant of SIN, then you're in deep error. God abhors sin because God is Holy and Righteous.

God is also, according to First John, LOVE. And in that love, He did something unexpected, something magnificent. When all indications showed that humanity was a failed enterprise, instead of wiping us out, God chose to love us in a different, costly manner. He Himself in Jesus Christ stood in the breach which existed between us and Him. NOTICE – He didn't tolerate us as we presently are which was broken, sinful, unredeemed. *Jesus loved us enough to get involved.* By blessing us with the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit, God severed the chains which held us enslaved to sin and freed us up to enjoy the fullness of life spent pursuing holiness.

"For the wages of sin is death." That means that as a Christian, we're empowered by God's Spirit to do a number of things. First, it means that we believe that there really is sin in the world. There is, at present, a strong push towards removing the idea of sinful behavior from our collective consciousness. Everything is relative we hear said. What's bad for you may not be bad for someone else. Oftentimes, Biblical proscriptions against certain behaviors are spoken of as being antiquated or culturally informed by the times and, since the times were 2000+ years ago, not remotely relevant now.

One of the things that's often held up in this regard is Paul's admonition for women to cover their heads while praying or worshipping. It seems ludicrous to us and to our modern sensibilities so we merely assume the man Paul got it wrong and that such thinking no longer applies. But if we were to dig a little deeper, we'd learn that in Corinth at the time, it was female prostitutes who uncovered their heads to alert customers to their status. Paul's literal declaration against head covering for women might be culturally situated but the broader Christian principal is still at play. One should never do anything that leads somebody else in the wrong direction.

Folks, the Bible isn't antiquated nor is it wrong about sins, as much as a lot of other people would have us believe.

The second thing we've got to take very seriously if we're going to put God's Word at the front and center of our lives is that sin leads to our death. Now look, that doesn't mean we have to disavow 500 plus years of scientific advancement nor stop doing what our doctors tell us. Rather it means taking the Bible at its word first and foremost. And what the Bible says is this – Sin isn't good for us. We should pray that sin would be crucified in us by the power of the Holy Spirit just as we should care about the sin in other people's life. We should love them enough to want the best for them.

So, Tolerance of sin isn't an option for us who profess Jesus Christ as Lord.

But neither is intolerance of the sinner. As we've studied Romans, I've mentioned on a number of occasions that it isn't a Christian response to turn up our noses at other people's misdeeds. We're not to assume ourselves to be perfect in such a way that allows us to condemn others without at one and the same time condemning ourselves. Pete as we know jaywalks but perhaps, we ourselves speed when we drive. Two sides of the same coin. I can't condemn Pete for his jaywalking because I do similarly.

Apathy under the banner of tolerance isn't an option for us either, not Biblically speaking. Jesus Himself tells us – *"You shall love...your neighbor as yourself."* If we don't desire eternal death for ourselves then we can't want it for someone else either. Placing the love of our neighbor as one of the chief commandments upon our life in Him means something. It means we can't be silent in the presence of sin. It necessarily means we can't say to Pete when he tells us we ought to be tolerant of his choices, "Well, you're just an idiot chum. Go jaywalk yourself to death, see if I care."

So, what do we do with Pete? We can't condemn him for his transgression from some higher moral ground. Friends, that's moralism, a form of morality gone wrong which isn't good for us or anyone else for that matter. We can't forsake Pete for his bad choices but neither should we blindly apply tolerance upon the situation because we know that it will end in his demise.

"For the wages of sin is death."

What can we do? We can love him, that's what. And yes, that's costly, yes that's time consuming, yes it'll be

frustrating, yes it might even place us in jeopardy as we find ourselves out there on the highway following after him telling him, in love, that God loves him and doesn't want him walking in front of cars whenever he gets a free moment.

If we really believe this verse from Romans then we know, deep down in our hearts, that the wages of sin are death BUT, and it's a pretty big BUT, the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ. It means that there is now an OUT, if you will, for us in our sin. We can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, embrace Jesus Christ, repent of our sins and be LED BACK INTO THE FOLD.

And who is to do that I wonder? Do we simply tolerate each other to death and leave it to God to turn people away from error, away from sin, away from eternal death? BY NO MEANS to use a significant phrase from this chapter of Romans. According to Scripture, the church is the body of Jesus Christ on earth in His physical absence. And again, that necessarily entails that we do care about ongoing sin. We do care about ethics, morality, doing the right thing both for ourselves and for other people. We're the people chosen by God to love others just as Jesus Christ loved us.

And how did Jesus love us? Was He apathetic? By no means – He took on flesh in order to get involved. Was Jesus intolerant of sinners? By no means – He ate with sinners, called the tax collector Matthew as an apostle, hung out with Zacchaeus, healed a prostitute. Was he tolerant of sin? By no means – He walked all the way to that lonely cross on Calvary in order that sin itself might be crucified in His body on the Cross.

In all things and in all ways, Jesus loved us. He spoke the truth to us. Pointed us in the right direction, gave us the Holy Spirit to keep us motivated and moving towards the narrow gate. As His disciples, it's only fitting that we do likewise.

So, what are we to do about Pete? About our society? SIMPLY PUT, WE LOVE. And we love in a way that's costly of our time, of our energy. We desperately want others to know Jesus Christ because in Him is eternal life. In Him death is vanquished forever.

I want to close with an illustration of what this kind of love looks like. Back when I was in seminary, I was enduring just a miserable class. The teacher seemed poorly prepared. The readings were tedious and not really helpful. Oftentimes the professor allowed the class to degenerate into mindless discussions. It wasn't worth anyone's time or money. And I wanted her to know it. So, I sat down and wrote a scathing email and was going to send it to her happily. I can see in retrospect that this really was a nasty and unproductive letter. That I was going to send it in an email was more than a bit craven. I didn't want to hear her side of view so I was going to fire off this little bit of vitriol in a manner that would allow myself to avoid any real challenge. Thankfully, I read the letter to a friend of mine named Matt. Now it helps to know that for the whole time I was living in Durham, Matt crashed on our couch free of charge as he and his wife actually lived somewhere else and he didn't have the money for an apartment of his own. So, I read this email I was going to send to him. He laughed at points; it was mean but witty. When I got done, I fully expected him to say, SEND IT RIGHT NOW. But you know what? He didn't do that. He cared enough to do better. He loved me enough to NOT tolerate my obnoxiousness. So, he simply said – "Is that really the way you want to talk to your sister in Jesus Christ?" My face flushed red out of a combination of embarrassment and anger. I mean, how dare he question me? As I look back on that incident now, I am grateful to God for the faith of people like Matt. He risked something to speak the truth. And he spoke the truth to me because he cared about me.

In Jesus Christ, we're supposed to care. We're not supposed to tolerate each other to death, rather we're called to love others in such a way to lead everyone to the arms of our Lord and savior.

"For the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ."

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.