

Teach and Admonish One Another

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: One Anothering

Colossians 3:12-17

“Thou shall not judge,” has become America’s new 11th commandment.

Tolerance is a perfectly good word; a Christian virtue, to be sure. It is but one virtue among a host of Christian virtues. Courage, loyalty and honesty are others that come immediately to mind.

But, in today’s culture, tolerance has become the chief virtue. There are no other absolute virtues any more beside tolerance and openness.

“Thou shall not judge,” has become America’s new 11th commandment. Value-free tolerance has become our new civil religion. We pride ourselves on being nice, tolerant people who allow everyone to do whatever he or she wants, so long as he or she doesn’t hurt anyone else. If only everyone, everywhere, under all circumstances would only be tolerant, what a wonderful world it would be.

The only sin that remains on the books in the 21st century is intolerance. There’s only one thing we can’t tolerate and that’s intolerance.

Allan Bloom, professor at the University of Chicago and author of the best selling book *The Closing of the American Mind*, writes, “The danger college students have been taught to fear... is not error but intolerance... there is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything.”

Do we really want a culture that tolerates everything? What would happen if parents and teachers could only exercise tolerance toward children? We would end up with spoiled, overindulged children.

People sometimes say, “Who am I to judge?” Do we really want jurors to be nonjudgmental about child molesters and serial rapists? Americans would never have put an end to slavery, outlawed child labor, emancipated women or ushered in the civil rights movement if there were no limits to our tolerance.

If we witness a vicious assault and do nothing to stop it, we could hardly be praised for being tolerant of a violent attacker. There are limits to our tolerance. The defining mark of a moral society is precisely its ability and willingness to make moral judgments on the things that truly matter.

We continue today our sermon series on the one another passages of the New Testament. Paul directs us in verse 13 to “bear with one another” and “forgive one another.” In verse 16, we are summoned to “teach and admonish one another.” The word “admonish” means to warn, exhort and correct someone. We don’t merely tolerate unacceptable behavior; we challenge it. Admonishing one another is meant to be redemptive, not punitive.

Excessive tolerance is not kind, it is cowardly.

John Wesley was instrumental in calling people together into communities to support one another and hold each other accountable. Wesley had a marvelous phrase for this mutual accountability: he called it “watching over one another in love.” Before people entered into these Wesleyan communities, they were asked a series of questions to determine if they were serious about living in mutual accountability.

“Does any sin, inward or outward, have dominion over you?”

“Do you desire to be told of your faults?”

“Do you desire to be told all your faults?”

“Do you desire that we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear or whatsoever we hear concerning you?”

“Do you desire that in doing this we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick and search your heart to the bottom?”

“Is it your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise and without reserve?”

Some of you may be amused and troubled by such invasive questions. Yet, it may reveal how far we have sunk into the abyss of radical individualism.

Several years ago, Kory Stringer, who played professional football for the Minnesota Vikings, died of heatstroke. At least three

NFL teams are now offering radio pills to its players in extreme heat. These pills don’t come cheap—a single pill lasting 36 hours costs \$30.

A crystal sensor on each pill has a frequency geared to a player’s body temperature. When a player’s body temperature rises, so does the frequency. A trainer waves a digital device in front of the athlete to determine if he is overheated and requires intervention.

Sometimes, in our Christian lives, we overextend ourselves and need other people’s intervention. When we stray from God, we need fellow Christians to bring us back. We need caring Christians who hold us accountable.

I have often heard it said, “It’s none of my business to judge someone else.” It’s certainly none of our business to be harsh or punitive in our judgments about people. We have no right to slander or criticize them unfairly.

But tolerance doesn’t give us permission to ignore a fellow believer’s reckless behavior. Must I sit idly by and watch someone else self-destruct? Excessive tolerance is not kind, it is cowardly. Confronting people with their own destructive behaviors is not a sign of intolerance; it’s a mark of true compassion.

American poet Ogden Nash wrote the verse,

“Sometimes with secret pride
I sigh to think how tolerant am I;
then wonder which is really mine:
tolerance or a rubber spine.”

We are advised to restore others in a spirit of gentleness rather than read them the riot act.

Some of us need courage to confront someone in love. Paul summons us to “Speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Many people quote to me Jesus’ words, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged? For with the judgment you make you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matthew 7:1-2).

Jesus does not ask us in these verses to suspend our critical faculties. If you read further in this same chapter, you will note Jesus asks us to discern true from false prophets (7:15-20). Later, in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus provides a three-step process for dealing with church discipline: one-on-one, one to two witnesses and, finally, the whole church (Matthew 18:15-20).

The word “judge” in this passage refers to censorious, condemning judgment. That’s why the church has condemned the pejorative words, “go to hell,” on the basis that this kind of judgment only God is competent to decide.

When it becomes necessary to confront someone, how do we go about it? We confront one another with humility. Let’s return to the lesson from Jesus’ sermon on the mount. Jesus sets up a classic hyperbole in verses 3-5 between a log-eyed reformer and a speck-eyed sinner. The image would be nearly comical, if it wasn’t true. How can I take the sawdust out of my neighbor’s eye when I have a two-by-four in my own eye?

We confront one another with gentleness. Paul writes in Galatians, “My friends, if anyone

is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1).

Gentleness is the fruit or by-product of a Spirit-directed life (Galatians 5:22-23). We are advised to restore others in a spirit of gentleness rather than read them the riot act. Notice how Paul concludes this verse in Galatians 6 by advising us to “Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.”

Now, suppose the shoe is on the other foot and we are on the receiving end of someone’s rebuke. Are we receptive and teachable? Are we able to take correction?

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, writes about businesses and charitable institutions desirous of rising above the level of mediocrity to achieve greatness. The move from good to great requires willingness on the part of leaders to confront the brutal facts of their situation. His book documents how often companies and churches refuse to face “the brutal facts.” How many of us insulate ourselves from the brutal facts of our situation?

We want to create a climate in this church where the truth is heard and brutal facts are confronted. Proverbs tells us, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love” (27:5). Gordon McDonald writes about the early days of his ministry. He met regularly with a few key leaders of his leadership board to gain perspective on how ministry was progressing in their church. Gordon was eager and willing to hear all the good things happening in the

“Lord, where we are wrong; make us willing to change. And where we are right, make us easy to live with.”

- Peter Marshall

church, but became defensive and resistant whenever something unpleasant was mentioned.

“One time,” Gordon said, “I must have sulked too much, because the chair of this leadership board leaned across the table and said, ‘Gordon, you have a trait that you must change. You’re too sensitive. We’re not talking about you and how we feel about you; we’re talking about your ministry and how we can make it better. Stop injecting your feelings into these discussions.’”

This man gave Gordon a gentle rebuke that has served him well in 35 years of ministry. “Every time my wife, my friend, my partner or enemy says something I don’t want to hear, I think about this man’s counsel.”

Peter Marshall, former preacher at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in D.C., said it this way: “Lord, where we are wrong; make us willing to change. And where we are right, make us easy to live with.”