

Series: HOT POTATOES! October 21, 2007

MOUNTAINS TO DIE ON: MY TRUTH, YOUR TRUTH
1 Corinthians 5:1-13

I. INTRO

- A. I don't know if you realize it or not, but the word **tolerance** has been redefined in the past 30 years. Tolerance in Webster's dictionary is defined as,

tolerance: sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing or conflicting with one's own; the act of allowing something.

-And I think Jesus would totally agree with that. He never told his followers to go out and pick fights with people who don't agree with their faith or value system. Jesus called his people to love--even their enemies. Jesus said, "I didn't come to condemn the world—but to save it."

1. As you look back through history, to **tolerate** has traditionally meant to peacefully co-exist with others; to offer others the same rights and privileges as you—even though you may **totally** disagree with their belief system and lifestyle. It's something we all long for. Acceptance.
-In fact, the kind of love Jesus calls us to confronts our racism, our arrogance and our insensitivity. We believe that Jesus was God with skin on. The fascinating thing was that almost everyone—except the religious people—wanted to get close to him. He must've been an extraordinarily accepting person!
2. But we live in a world that has redefined and re-invented tolerance. One author describes this re-definition as,

All opinions are equal...there is no rational way to discern between them.

Do you see the difference? Tolerance is no longer giving people space to believe as they choose; it's the death of absolute truth. It's a world where truth is so watered down, so anemic that it's nothing more than opinion.

-And if you don't agree? Well, you'll probably get called narrow-minded. An obnoxious bigot. A know-it-all.

- B. And that sometimes defines our fear, doesn't it. We feel caught between believing that how God has defined truth—is **really** true and right and good, and not wanting to get labeled and avoided as **intolerant**. In Canada, by the way, being labeled **intolerant** is right up there with being called a child molester.

-So. **Is** there an objective standard for what's right—and what's wrong? And does the standard change—you know, depending on what the culture happens to be thinking at any given time?

1. We as a community believe that there **is** an objective standard—given and inspired by God. We call it **The Bible**, or **THE Book**. While cultures and the issues that they face do in fact change—the principles for how humans love God and love others don't.
-We believe it is the description of ultimate reality—and then how to live in and cooperate with that reality. We believe it accurately describes what we can't see or know experientially—the soul, God—and life after death. And we believe that

when we defy this reality, we are defying what is good and best for ourselves and everyone.

2. So, the **hot potatoes** are the issues where what the Bible—or God says defies what our culture says. The **hot potatoes** are those truths that challenge our comfort zone. It's the stuff we really **don't** want to talk about—but **need** to!
 - The first hot potato we are going to deal with is this whole redefinition of tolerance. How do we show love, grace and acceptance—and tell the truth about a world system that's gotten way off track? And how do we have the guts to stand up for what we believe without alienating people Jesus desperately loves?
 - Can I answer all those questions to your satisfaction? I can't even answer them all to **my** satisfaction! But I'll do my best. After this service, we'll have a brief Q&A. And then at the end of the series in November, we'll have a whole service devoted to Q&A—called, appropriately, I think, **Paint Ball Sunday**.

II. THE CASE STUDY

- A. This case study we'll look at this morning is a very messy situation. It's about incest. Some guy is sleeping with his stepmother. Anyone here who thinks that's okay? Good. We're done. Any questions? Let me read what Paul, early leader, founder of this church has to say:

I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you—something that even pagans don't do. I am told that a man in your church is living in sin with his stepmother. You are so proud of yourselves, but you should be mourning in sorrow and shame. And you should remove this man from your fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:1-2 NLT).

1. Please understand. This wasn't about a moment of passion where some guy and his Dad's young wife got into a bad situation and came clean. There were two issues: Blatant, persistent immorality on one side, and arrogant church leaders who not only refused to deal with it—but were **proud of their tolerance**. And Paul was horrified by both situations.
 - You have to know that not only was this condemned in the Jewish law, Roman law forbade it too. In fact the punishment was very harsh. If you were convicted of it—you would lose your Roman citizenship and be exiled. It was punishment **worse** than death.
 - Now, what would the leaders of the church be **proud** of this? Part of it had to do with pagan philosophy that had gotten dragged into the church. It was a form of dualism—spirit or soul is **all** good and the body is **all** evil. Kind of the disposable container our soul is trapped in. Because it was evil and disposable—it didn't matter at all what you did with it. **Hedonism—the belief that pleasure is the chief end of life** was one way to live that out. Have sex with your stepmother? If that's what flips your switch--why **not**?
2. If you want a scandal to compare that to in our culture, you don't have to travel too far. Remember the recent allegations of sexual abuse by priests—and a religious hierarchy that appeared to just cover it up? The world was **furious!** And rightly so.
 - The single most profound difference was that this church in Corinth was **proud** of their tolerance. My guess is that the person involved was a person of influence that they felt obligated to and couldn't afford to alienate. So, flipped the situation—and bragged about how cool and accepting and free their church was.

3. And the whole message of Jesus was placed on the line. Why would Jesus die a horrible deal on a cross for sin—if sin was really no big deal? Why would God lay out the guardrails and paint a center line down the highway—if morality is just a massive parking lot—and it really doesn't matter where you go in it?
 -Their reputation in the City of Corinth was that they were the **First Church of *Wha's Happenin'!* The First Church of Anything Goes!** And what they laid on the line was their credibility. People may not agree with purity and high moral standards; they may even laugh at them; but they **do** admire people who have the guts to swim upstream in a downstream world.

B. How Paul told them to deal with this situation took **tough love**. We get a little queasy and uncomfortable with that, don't we?

Even though I am not with you in person, I am with you in the Spirit. And as though I were there, I have already passed judgment on this man in the name of the Lord Jesus. You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. Then you must throw this man out and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns (1 Corinthians 5:3-5 NLT).

1. Anyone ever heard the word, **excommunication**? A better word is **discipline**; I don't think communication should ever stop. It's a last ditch effort to bring a person in trouble back to their sanity. The biological comparison would be radical surgery. In this case, Paul told them to ask this guy to leave the church.
 -Jesus himself laid out four progressive steps for dealing with problem situations like this. It's found in Matt. 18:
 *You go and talk about the issue—**just between the two of you—no one else involved**. You tell them clearly and sensitively what the problem is and work to resolve it.
 *If they blow you off and there's no progress—even after a few tries—you ask someone else to come along—someone you both agree on.
 *If they blow that process off too, the entire church confronts them.
 *If they won't listen even to the church—then Jesus says to treat them like a pagan or corrupt tax collector. They are acting like they are outside the followers of Jesus—so that's how you treat them.
 -So—**why does Paul skip the first three steps?** Well, he had addressed this situation in a previous letter and both the man involved—and the leadership of the church—had totally ignored him. Now they're at step 4.
2. As harsh and tough as it sounds, Paul makes it clear—the **goal** is redemption, not punishment.
 -It's an attempt to restore this man to a relationship with God and quarantine the church from further blatant rebellion. If they don't take this seriously, they are jeopardizing the entire mission of Jesus in Corinth. Sin is destructive—and the spirit of defiance is contagious. It's always lurking under the surface of everyone's life.
3. Now, most people get the concept of putting someone out of bank if they're embezzling, or out of hockey if they're cheating, or off the police force if a cop's on the take. We get that. It's done to protect the integrity of the organization.
 -But what's the deal with this?

...hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns.
(1 Corinthians 5:5 NLT)

I don't have a clue! Let's move on.

- a. Actually, what it's talking about is that when we put our faith in Jesus Christ and choose to follow His leadership--something dramatic takes place. In another letter to the Colossians, Paul says,

For he has rescued us from the one who rules over the kingdom of darkness, and he has brought us into the Kingdom of His dear Son (Colossians 1:13 NLT).

- b. To be a part of a *kingdom* means that you are under the leadership of the king in the kingdom. To persistently *refuse* his leadership puts you under the leadership of the rebel kingdom—the kingdom of darkness. And most defiant people don't choose a different direction until life starts to lose big chunks—and the pain gets so intense they can't stand it any longer.
- c. Think about the *prodigal son*. The father waited for him for years. When did *he* start to want his Dad? Well, when he was out of friends and money and slopping pigs for a living.
4. See, the deal is—and the Bible's pretty clear on this—being a part of Jesus' Kingdom and Jesus' community means choosing to *follow* Him, not *defy* him. You can't choose Jesus cause He has a great benefit plan—and then choose the kingdom of darkness for the road you'll walk. If you *want* life, you have to *choose* life.
5. The other thing Paul talks about is *very* important. Let's read what he says: **When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people. It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you (1 Corinthians 5:9-13 NLT)."**
- a. It's interesting. Many people tend to think that when they follow Jesus—they should just hang out with people who follow Jesus. Jesus called us to be salt and light—which are mediums of influence. And if we follow his example—that means we will probably be hanging out with all kinds of people—including those who are far from God.
-Paul is saying—I *never* intended for you to avoid wayward people in the world system. How do you think they'll ever hear about Jesus and choose to follow him if they don't see a real live example of someone who loves Him and lives like Him?

- b. If you follow Jesus' example, however, in how he dealt with the religious professionals—people who put on a good show but didn't love God—he stayed away from them. He had some very tough words for them.
- c. Paul says here, "If someone says they are going to heaven but live like hell—stay away from them!" Let's say that you hang around someone in a church who is known for their dishonesty. When you hang with them, you say, "I don't really have a problem with what you're doing." It's the wrong message.

III. IS ANYTHING GOES TOLERANCE...LOVE?

- A. As I've already told you, we called this series of talks, *Hot Potatoes* because there are issues in *every* culture that are tough and messy to deal with. Issues that raise the temperature in the room. Jesus called the people who followed him to live with grace and courage. To love and accept others just as they are—and to also have the courage to say "yes" when we need to say "yes," and to say "no" when we need to say "no." Courage is one of our core values at The Olive Branch. And sometimes, with all humility and grace we will have to say, "The world system says this is normal, but God says it's wrong."

-So. Is the church only for perfect people? Anyone here who's perfect—or hasn't sinned in a long, long, *long* time—so long you can barely remember what it feels like?

-That eliminates the first group. Or, is the church maybe just for people who *think* they're perfect, or are great at *pretending* they're perfect. I prefer to see the church as a collection of screw-ups who want to cooperate with God's plan to set the world right. And they *know* that setting the world right starts with *them*.

1. Let's talk about what sin is, okay? At its very core, sin is not a mistake or even a moral failure. If you cut it open—do an autopsy—what you find is that sin, at the heart, is a rebellious direction in life. It's believing the illusion that you're self-sufficient; that you're the master of your own destiny—that you can do whatever you want to do. Sin is refusing to say, "I am *created* and I'm responsible to my *Creator*."

-Think about the difference between an employee who gets unavoidably delayed because of a traffic accident in front of him—and an employee who shrugs and says, "I *felt* like sleeping in. *Deal* with it!" There's a difference. And the difference is *defiance*.

-Jesus told a story about a religious leader who went right up to the front of the temple and had a little brag session with God about how good he was. The contrast is guy who was a greedy traitor to both his God and his people, but stands at the back and says, "God, be merciful to me—a sinner." And the one who left the temple right with God was...? The *traitor*. Attitude is *everything*.

2. Here's the point—and it's a really, *really* important one. The problem is *never* the presence of sin; it's the absence of repentance. I'll say it again;

The problem is never the presence of sin; it's the ABSENCE OF REPENTANCE

The real issue Paul is facing down here is not incest; it's rebellion—and arrogance. A man who says, "This is what I'm doing—go ahead! Stop me!" And a church that

didn't have the moral courage to call him on it—and said to Paul, “We care more about staying in **his** favor than what either God or **you** think!” Rebellion—and the absence of repentance is a huge issue to God.

-That's what John, early Christian leader and writer says. Basically: Sin is so destructive that being totally free of it is **always** the goal. But on this side of eternity—ain't likely to happen (rough translation). The problem is denial.

If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts (1 John 1:8-10 NLT).

3. Friends, lets just be **real** clear about this. The attitude, the philosophy we drag into the church is **tolerance**—as it's been redefined. Worshipers of tolerance ask, “Who defines **sin?**” That's a **great** question. And the answer is—our **Creator**. God has made it clear what rebellion against Him looks like—and the forms this rebellion takes.
 - Read the 10 commandments, and you get a pretty good idea what rebellion is like. It starts by putting other things before God—like ourselves, or our pride, or money. We treat God with contempt—and all the other junk follows that is so devastating; greed, hatred, jealousy, murder, stealing, sexual immorality of any kind, having to have way, **way** more than we need. All of this defies how God has set up this world. The **worst** sin, believe it or not, is not murder; it's rebellion. Choosing to be god of your own life and define truth by how **you** see life.
 - You and I can **choose** to do that—define right and wrong, truth and error based on what **we** think, but we can't do that and claim that Jesus is Lord—because, at that point, **we're** lord of our own lives. If the Bible is from God—and is right and true and accurate as Jesus said it was—then we don't have the right to change what it says because it challenges our lifestyle or the moral values of our culture.
 - If what it says is **not** right and true then, friends, **everything** in life is up for grabs—including God, eternity, hope and life after death. See, you can't have it both ways, where you believe the really cool things it says—and then rip out the pages you don't like because they point to something that makes you uncomfortable.
4. Know what the problem is for people who've been around the church for a while? **Lists**. Followers of Jesus, down through the years, have proclaimed all kinds of gray things, neutral things—to be sins. Things the Bible doesn't say **anything** about. And the list changes from century to century—from eating meat on Friday to drinking wine to eating in the church. And people want to **die** over opinions. **Opinions!** And it has **really** confused a lot of people. Any other rules you've heard of? And these rules...are? Opinions! They need to **stay** in that category. Opinions are the place for **tolerance**—not what God has clearly spoken to!
5. Let me mention something at this point that is very important. One of the best known and most quoted teachings of Jesus among people far from God is, **Don't judge or YOU'LL be judged!**
 - And that's absolutely true. It goes on to say that if you've got a huge 2X4 in your own eye, you're going to do some damage to people if you try to pick a speck of sawdust out of someone else's eye. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He says, “Get

the 2X4 out of your eye—the stuff that’s making you ignorant and blind. Get your eye healed up—and **then**, as a healed healer, you’ll be able to truly help others with **their** eyesight.

-If you’re going to help others, it had better be with the loving, cautious, humble attitude of someone who’s seen and dealt with their **own** junk!

- B. I honestly believe that some people advocate tolerance because they think that **tolerance**—as we’ve redefined it—is synonymous with **love**. Is that true? If your 10 year old boy says, “Driving motorcycles at 140 kph is **my truth**”—is letting him have and live out his truth...love?

-Is it the **loving** thing to do to never confront and fine drivers who are drunk?

-Is it the **loving** thing to do for a teacher to just let a class dissolve into chaos?

-Is it the **loving** thing to do for parents to just allow a child to eat junk, watch TV, and refuse to go to school because that’s what they **want** to do? Love usually comforts and consoles—but **sometimes** love confronts! Stops things! Love is usually tolerant and patient—but sometimes love is **very** intolerant! Hospitals--especially Operating Rooms--are intended to be **very** intolerant places. They have very strict rules. Why? **Because people’s lives hang in the balance!** .

1. God’s plan is to set this world right. To stop the downward spiral we’re in—to stop evil—to break the back of poverty, disease, crime, broken relationships—

everything that’s wrong. Anyone here who’s happy about that?

-How many of you see things that go on in this world that make you **angry**? Like kids starving? Like dictators who won’t let food get through to their people when they’re dying of starvation. Like hatred, and ethnic cleansing and Auschwitz?

That’s how God feels. The actual word Paul uses is **wrath**, or anger.

The wrath/anger of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness (Romans 1:18 TNIV).

- a. Now, that sounds scary—and conjures up images from the dark ages of this furious God throwing lightning bolts through people’s chests. But notice that his anger is not towards people; it’s toward the wrong things happening on our planet—the things that are destroying the people He loves. The opposite of wrath or anger is not love—it’s neutrality. I don’t know of a Dad alive who could watch some guy hurt his daughter and be **neutral** about it. That’s not love!

-If you’ve ever had someone you love who’s gotten cancer—you **hate** the cancer. So do all the people trying to kill it. You **hate** what it does to them—how it sucks the life out of them, wounds them steals their health and all their opportunities for the future.

- b. What this passage is saying is that everything that is killing this planet, killing people’s souls, destroying people’s futures, keeping people locked in hopelessness and poverty and starvation—is under the **anger** of God. And He is powerful enough to give sin and death...a death sentence. All this stuff is like the Titanic after it hit the iceberg; it’s goin’ down! And the only way to **not** go down with the ship is to get **off** of it.
- c. Here’s the deal, friends. When you or I rebel and defiantly go outside of what God wants and what He’s called us to, and what He’s blessed, we

have entered territory that has been declared cursed; doomed. It doesn't matter whether it's a big public splashy sin or a little private rebellion of pride and unteachability—it's a **bad** course.

-God will plead with you, work to draw you back to a place of health—but if you defy Him and refuse to cooperate—there comes a place where he will in essence say, “Have it your way.” And you will be turned over to a way you think is free—but leads to slavery.

-In the passage I quoted from, also written by Paul to the Romans, he talks about people who, in their **hearts—know!** They **know** who God is; they **know** right from wrong—but they refuse to acknowledge Him as God—or His ways as right. Paul says,

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another (Romans 1:25 TNIV).

-Do you understand what that means? When God **gives you over**—He is in essence saying, “Have it your way.” You could call it **intolerant—tolerance.**

-And **that's** what Paul is saying to do with this Corinthian guy who was defying God, defying Paul, and defying the church. **Turn him over!** He's chosen the way of rebellion—so turn him over to the ultimate rebel. Satan. And pray, pray, **pray** that the downward spiral will bring him to the end of a messy road where his soul will be salvaged. Getting what you want may **not** be what you really want.

- When you choose to walk away from God's love and from the life he loves, the only other alternative is the wrath. It's impersonal—but it's the only other alternative

2. Let me mention something else from that same chapter that fits precisely with this issue of tolerance—again, defined as “nobody's wrong; everybody's right.” Paul has this whole list of horrible things that are evidence of a world gone wrong, creating hell on earth—and he says,

Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:32 TNIV).

-Do you get what he's saying? Sitting by placidly and giving your approval to sin is as bad as practicing it. Again, in a culture like ours, we think **love** is saying, “Hey, it's all good! It doesn't matter, really.” Why are we too chicken, too ashamed to say, “You know, that's not right.” The opposite of love is not hate; it's apathy. It's watching someone who's on a bad path—a world system that's on a path to total chaos—and choosing not to say a **word!**

3. And that's why God doesn't sit up in Heaven and just mind His own business. We **are** his business. He created everything—and He is in the process of making it right. And He wants people who **care** about seeing it made right. And if it **is** going to get made right, it won't happen with a bunch of wishy-washy people talking

about **my** truth, and **your** truth, and **his** truth—here a truth, there a truth, everywhere a truth, truth.

QUESTION AND ANSWER TIME

4. Is this a message about intolerance? **Absolutely not!** We are called to be loving and gracious and accepting and kind and forgiving toward **all** people. When people fall, we are called to restore them gently—to remember that it **could** be us. We are called to confess our sins to each other—and to forgive others of their sins. We are called to love and serve **extravagantly! Outrageously!** And when we love and serve in that way, we earn the right to speak!
-But...**but...**we are called to be full of grace and truth

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

How are you doing? Are you in a place where you can humbly, carefully, lovingly help people on their way? And are **you** on a good path that will take you where you want—and long to be?