

Knowledge and Truth

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For any knowledge at all to be possible there must be true things and there must be false things.

LA Times, February 22, front page, "Anti-Gay Video Highlights Church Agenda." This front page article in the *LA Times* speaks of this video that is entitled "The Gay Agenda," a 20 minute videotape that has been sent to a lot of congressmen and senators and public officials, to some degree made popular by James Dobson's show "Focus on the Family." Many of you have seen this because it's been to your church. It comes under heavy attack Monday in the *LA Times*. There are also some things going on in Long Beach which we'll find about shortly and at 4:00 we'll talk with Jane Chastain. She's been reflecting on this issue all last week. It's an important issue, one that we need to be clear headed about.

I'd like to start out by making some comments about knowledge and tolerance by way of laying a predicate to any further discussion on this issue because there have been a lot of charges flying these last few years as this issue has come into the fore and Christians have raised moral objections about the social acceptability of homosexuality. I have come under quite a bit of attack.

I'm actually a little stunned by the way that people have responded to me in some regards. I got a letter about a month and a half ago. The writer of the letter said, "You are one of the few truly evil people that I know." I know I'm not perfect but that sounds a little bit extreme to me, especially considering what I represent and what I'm trying to accomplish. The interesting thing, though, is that this assessment was made because of my particular moral position on homosexuality. So let me just start out and talk a few moments about the notion of knowledge and the notion of tolerance because the two are tied together.

I want to start out telling you something you already know but haven't thought about in a very detailed fashion. It has to do with knowledge. It has to do with how we learn things. When you ask the question, how do we learn in general, many of you might answer that we observe. That's a start. Observation is a beginning, but observation isn't really the learning process because we need some way to sort out those things that we observe. We need some way to evaluate the things we observe. It's much like building something. You have to start out with some raw materials, but what you need to take the materials and build them into something useful is tools. So we employ certain tools with our observations in order to learn things. When you think about what knowledge is it is basically what we get when we separate what is true from what is false. It's building form observation much like you would build furniture from raw materials using a particular plan and using tools.

What are the tools that we use in our observations of the world that help us to separate fact from fiction? To put it very simply, the tool is rationality. Rationality, the ability to think, to observe, to reason, to sort out and ultimately to eject some things that aren't true, enables us to know. Rationality is the tool that we use to acquire knowledge.

Of course, this whole process is based on a very important notion, a notion, by the way, that we've never learned in a formal sense, but it's part of the raw materials of thought. The notion is this: there are some things that are true and there are some things that are false. Rationality gives us the ability to think, sort out, eject that which is false so that we can know that which is true. For any knowledge at all to be possible there must be true things and there must be false things. Very straight forward. Like I said you didn't learn that, you already knew that. That's part of the raw materials of rationality that we're born with.

In a formal sense it's stated as the Law of Non-contradiction. A cannot be non-A in the same way and in the same relationship. A thing can't be its opposite at the same time and in the same way. Opposite views can't be true at the same time. There is truth and there is falsehood and rationality helps us to sort through that which we observe so we can determine what is sound and unsound. This is very practical. As a matter of fact we do this every moment of virtually every day.

Take mushrooms for example. When we go to harvest mushrooms we must observe and then discern between different types of mushrooms because some are not edible, some are even poisonous. I actually had someone tell me the other day that all mushrooms are edible, but some mushrooms you only eat once because they kill you. I use this as an illustration because most of us aren't in the habit of gathering food. We go to the market and everything there is healthy and good for us, we don't have to think about it much, by and large. But if you imagine for a moment that you were a mushroom aficionado and you went out into the forest to pick wild mushrooms you would have to know the difference between a healthy mushroom and an unhealthy mushroom, a tasty one and a poisonous one. You would apply your rationality, thinking, observation and reason to sort through the mushrooms and choose the good ones and

reject the bad ones because good ones are delicious and bad ones can kill you.

This gives us a little bit of a clue when we say that something is true. When we say that we have true knowledge of something we mean that something we know for sure or something that is true corresponds to what actually is. I think it was Aristotle who put it this way. If we say that it is and it is, or that it isn't and it isn't, then it's true. If we say that it isn't and it is, or that it is and it isn't, then it's false. It's very simple. True knowledge corresponds to what is really there. Some mushrooms kill. Some mushrooms are delicious. Our knowledge helps us to distinguish between what is truly good and truly bad in the area of mushrooms.

Just think for a moment what if we lived in a world where it was not possible to separate truth from error? What if we couldn't make those kinds of discernments? What if we didn't have rationality as a tool that we could use on the raw materials of observation to define and divide that which is good and bad. That would be a terrible world because we wouldn't be able to tell food from poison. We wouldn't be able to tell friend from foe. We wouldn't be able to tell good from bad, or right from wrong, or healthy from unhealthy, or safe from unsafe. In fact, we would die in a world like that. We could not survive

Like I said at the beginning, I'm telling you something that you already know. You do the things that are necessary to live life in a healthy, safe, sane life. You get into a car and follow the traffic laws. Or you cross the street and look both ways. There are millions of examples. Just think about what you've done in the last three hours and all of the decisions that you've made that were life and death decisions based on your ability to discern the difference between what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, times when you invested your rationality in the observations you made about the world around you in a way that made a difference whether you lived or died. This is so pedestrian we don't even think about it, but it happens all the time.

I want you to think for just a moment what you would say to someone who wanted to change those rules.

We would say that person was foolish. We would die in a world without those rules and quickly. But that circumstance is precisely what we're facing right now. We have a way of doing thought, of discovery and analysis that is absolutely critical to our physical survival. But when it comes to moral and spiritual knowledge people want to change the rules because the rules attempt to separate truth from fiction in the area of morals and religion.

My contention is that if it's absolutely necessary for us to use rationality to discern truth from error in the physical realm, it is just as important to use rationality to discern truth from error in the spiritual and moral realm as well. The problem is that when we employ rationality and critical thinking to the physical realm we are considered sane and prudent, but when we apply rationality to the area of moral and spiritual truth we are considered intolerant.

This is where this whole notion of toleration relates to searching for knowledge. Tolerance is a very confusing term, especially the way it's been used of late. It's much like the term pluralism which has been distorted in the last twenty years to mean something entirely different than what it originally meant. It originally meant that everybody got their say. Everybody threw in their two cents, was able to argue for their point of view, discuss it, give their reasons why they were right and the others were wrong. Everybody got to play in this game and then a consensus came in society from that notion of pluralism. The notion has changed and I've mentioned this several times because I want that idea to stick with you because most of the time when you hear the term pluralism now, and this is captured in much of the conversation about multiculturalism these days, it is that pluralism now means that nobody's view is no more superior to anyone else's view. People have given up on the notion that there is such a thing as true truth, especially in spiritual and moral things. If you suggest that your view is more sane, sound, reasonable, has better critical assessment than someone else's view, then you are considered to be an intolerant person.

I'd like to make a very critical distinction here when thinking about the issue of tolerance. Tolerance is a word that applies to how we treat people, not how we treat ideas. Tolerance is a word that applies to how we treat people, not how we treat ideas. We are to be tolerant of people, but we are not to be tolerant of ideas. What do I mean by not tolerating ideas? We are to address ideas in the same way that we address any other observations that we make in this world. We look at this world and make observations and we use rationality to thread through those things and be critical of our observations, to try and discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood. When it comes to religion and when it comes to moral and spiritual issues, anything dealing with the immaterial realm, we are to be just as assiduous in applying rational, critical thinking to the process of separating truth from error as we are in the material, physical, amoral realm.

If we don't do it there will be the same consequences as not applying rationality in the physical realm. We will die. The reason is that if we apply this new kind of tolerance to ideas, if we apply this notion of tolerance that nobody's ideas are any better than anyone else's and it's wrong to argue against somebody's idea, what happens is that it becomes impossible to know anything at all. All truth ultimately turns out to be the same. If all truth is equally true then there is no way to make any distinctions and no knowledge is possible because true knowledge is only possible when you

separate truth from error.

Dr. Frank Beckwith was a guest a couple of weeks ago on my show and he also spoke at Hope Chapel last week. He tells a story of his sister over at Loyola Marymount University when she went to one of her classes taught by a woman professor. The professor started her class with this statement. "All truth is relative. There is nothing we can know for sure. Therefore we ought to be tolerant of every person's viewpoint and let everyone have a say." What was really curious about this, and Frank pointed this out, is that any professor who is willing to make that statement at the beginning of her class has just taken away all possibility of learning anything. As a matter of fact, that professor would be most honest by saying, "Class dismissed." You can't know anything at all. You can't know anything for sure. Everybody's opinion is equally valid, equally reasonable, equally true. Therefore, there's nothing to learn. Let's go home.

If education is the search for true knowledge rather than false knowledge why learn at all? One could ask why we should tolerate people if all knowledge is equally true? There's no reason to tolerate anything because your truth that we ought to respect and tolerate people is no more true than its opposite if that notion is to be respected. In other words, why ought we tolerate? That's a particular truth that may not be valid either. In fact it isn't if your statement there is no truth is a true statement.

That's why this view of truth actually destroys true tolerance. Is it tolerant to say something is true when it's really false? That might be tolerant but it's a strange kind of tolerance and a kind of tolerance that brings a tremendous amount of danger. That's like saying that mushroom is healthy when it's not healthy. In fact, if everything is the same we have no real choices whatsoever. That includes the moral arena. We can survive if we don't tolerate other people. I mentioned a moment ago that we should tolerate people, but if we don't we can survive. But we cannot survive if we are irrational. If we tolerate every single piece of information as equally true we will not survive. If we are intolerant we are unpleasant human beings, but if we are irrational when it comes to truth we are not merely unpleasant, we are dead human beings because we can't survive that way.

Once again let me say tolerance is how you treat people. Rationality is how you treat ideas.

Here's the application to social issues. It flies directly in the face of the current notion of pluralism. The application is we are to respect and tolerate people because people are made in the image of God and have transcendent value. They are worthwhile, they are intrinsically valuable in themselves. Because they are we don't mistreat people because we don't agree with what they say. We are to respect and tolerate people. As Christians we are to express an attitude of graciousness and respect to people we disagree with. That doesn't mean that all morals are considered equal or all forms of moral life are to be considered legal. That's not healthy, that's not safe and we do make moral distinctions about the way we live our lives with our law. We make those distinctions. But we are to show toleration to people.

What we don't tolerate is ideas. Instead of tolerating ideas we are to examine ideas just like we examine anything else. We are to use rationality. We are to use our thinking, our reasoning, our logic. We are to sort out. We are to use our best critical faculties to try and determine what is true and what is false. We should be very critical of ideas. We should use rational, critical faculties in a rigorous way to determine if an idea is good or bad, healthy or poisonous. And in the public marketplace we have to do this aggressively because fewer and fewer people are willing to take this on.

What I'm very frustrated about is when Christians seek to be tolerant of the individual person but also seek not to be tolerant of the ideas, but very critical of the ideas and ask the questions: Is this idea a good idea or is it bad? Is it true or false? Then they are attacked as being intolerant.

Why do I believe in this notion? Because it's impossible to argue against it. If you really hold this other form of tolerance, this other kind of pluralism, it makes it impossible for you to distinguish between good and bad but also to make any meaningful statement about anything whatsoever. As a matter of fact the statement that you ought to be tolerant of people's viewpoints is a nonsense statement.

That's why on this show we talk about many different things. I talk about what I believe and I give my reasons for why I believe it. I expect you to tolerate me as a person just as I seek to tolerate you as an individual and I seek to be kind and gracious and open to what you have to say and treat you with respect. But please do not tolerate my ideas. Criticize them. Think them through. Use your rational capabilities to decide whether they are good or true or right ideas. If they're not then you should reject them.

This is precisely the point at which Christians are being attacked right now. We have been faulted for even attempting to engage the process of moral reflection and discernment. That brings us right to the issue that I opened up with, the homosexual issue.

As I was flying back from India and about to arrive in India, the gentleman next to me for most of the flight, an Indian man who slept most of the time, talked with me about this. He was on his way to Colorado to do some teaching. He's a professor and he's very concerned about what is happening in Colorado, about what he understood to be an anti-homosexual sentiment. I clarified for him the law that was passed. The constitutional amendment was actually an equal right amendment. It basically held that every person should have the same rights as every other person. It wasn't an attempt to attack a particular group but to equalize things.

He made the point that in India they are very tolerant. I was thinking they are very tolerant much the same way that Americans are tolerant. They are tolerant of everything except Christianity. I wanted to respond to this and reflect on this notion of tolerance. I tried to make it clear to him that in this country homosexuals can do pretty much what they want. There are some laws on the books in some states that limit the behavior of homosexuals, but for the most part that's not being enforced and that's not what is at issue here.

The point of this issue used to be that homosexuals used to ask to be left alone to do what they want to do. Now that's essentially happening. There is tolerance nationwide for this behavior even though many people have moral problems with it. Even though it creates a tremendous drain on the health resources in this country there is tolerance. Even though there's a health risk to the rest of the people in this country there is still tolerance. People have a very tolerant attitude when it comes to homosexual behavior. In fact it's considered impolite to reflect negatively on it, which is my point by the way. No one now is making homosexuality illegal. No one is saying that. I know of no Christian leader saying that we ought to make homosexual behavior done in the privacy of their own home illegal. So there is tremendous toleration of homosexuality.

What they're asking for goes way beyond that. That movement and many who are attached to it don't want us to even believe what we believe about it or, worse yet, to tell anybody what we believe about it. They don't want us to even believe that homosexuality is immoral. They don't want us to tell anybody the we think homosexuality is immoral or try to persuade them. This is an issue of ideas right now, not behavior. Nobody is intolerant of the behavior. They're saying that we shouldn't be able to think about it or tell anybody about it. That is true intolerance. The Christians are not wearing the shoe of intolerance here. The shoe is on the other foot. We are simply asking people to use rationality to discern good from bad, true from false in the area of morals.

We have come to the conclusion and we are arguing in the marketplace for that conclusion and for that we are being attacked. For that we are being told to shut up. For that we are being called fascists, bigots, arrogant and narrow-minded. Why? Because we want our point of view to be heard.

If we abandon rationality in the process of making decisions between what is true and false in the area of morals then we'll be just as dead as if we did it in the area of mushroom gathering.

Some people think that Christians have no right to believe in morality in this country. It's a strange notion. Dr. Beckwith made this observation. In our country now the guy with the fewest moral rules is the most tolerant and amazingly is considered morally superior. The least morality is the most morality. Strange ethic and a good example of what happens when rationality is abandoned on the moral issues.

At least that's the way I see it.
