

THE BIG IDEA: We tolerate what doesn't agitate.

The Take-Off

Right off the bat, let me tell you what we're going to encounter in Acts 22 this morning, and even though it's in the Bible, this is something that all of us know to be true: at some point, the tolerant get intolerant.

We've been talking for a few weeks about how Paul has been making his way to Jerusalem, and how he fully expects to die there.

When we start reading today, we'll see that - just as he expected - Paul has arrived in Jerusalem and has been arrested. In fact, the passage we'll be seeing today is in essence, Paul taking the stand in his defense, and something that he shares is going to send the courtroom into a frenzy.

So what does that have to do with tolerance and intolerance.

Simply this: **we tolerate what doesn't agitate**, and we're going to see that Big Idea played out in Paul's defense here in Acts 22.

There are takeaways for each of us: If Jesus isn't your thing, then this will give you insight into the huge lie in our culture that is "tolerance". If you're a follower of Jesus, then you'll gain wisdom on what to expect when you share Jesus in that "tolerant" culture.

Now, before I can show you this playing out in Acts, we probably need to try and establish the foundational idea of tolerance - what it is and what it isn't.

Today, tolerance seems to be another word for acceptance or agreement

You've seen this in action. The minute you disagree with someone's belief or lifestyle, you're labeled intolerant.

But tolerance only works when there is disagreement, right?

We don't tolerate what we agree with or like. I don't tolerate watching a Panthers game or eating chocolate.

But I do tolerate Wendy putting mushrooms in the spaghetti sauce.

That's why intolerance is always a clue that we've touched on a person's deeply held belief, and it should alert us to insert a lot of grace into the situation.

Now, I want to try to show how this played out in Acts 22, so as we go through the chapter, we're going to see that there were 4 things that Paul shared in his defense.

3 of them were tolerated and one of them wasn't, and it's pretty surprising which one wasn't.

But, we'll get to that in a bit. First, here are 3 things that Paul shared that the crowd had no trouble tolerating.

1. **The Jews could tolerate Paul's religious work (verses 2-5)**

- a. Do you want to know one thing that will NEVER bother unbelievers? You coming to church.
- b. In fact, the world tolerates your religious work, and apparently it's been that way for a long time because Paul says here in verse 3 that he was just as zealous religiously as any of the people in the crowd
- c. The world is not offended by your zealous work for the church or even for God
- d. That's why Paul was always trying to make it clear that works - even well-intended work for God - could never be enough to save us, and it would never be enough to save those around us
- e. Look at what he wrote to the Galatians in Galatians 3:3 - he called them foolish for trying to earn what can only be received
- f. No one's coming to The Gathering because we've worked our fingers to the bone to "have God" or "have a better church"
- g. Why? Because that doesn't set us apart from any of the other world religions that are also working for salvation.
- h. So when Paul said he was like them in his zeal, it didn't even register a clinched jaw with his enemies.
- i. What we take from this, at least as followers of Jesus, is that our religious work is not enough to draw people to a place where they must respond to truth.
- j. It didn't work for Paul, and it won't work for us.

2. **The Jews could tolerate Paul's personal testimony (verses 6-11)**

- a. After sharing about his zeal and hard work - which was something everyone who heard him could relate to - Paul shared something a little more personal.
- b. Paul shares his testimony - the story of how he found personal salvation in Jesus

- c. Honestly, this is something that I would have expected the crowd to respond to, but their lack of response shows that they were more than content to tolerate Paul's salvation
- d. Of course, when you really stop and think about it, it's not much different than what we encounter today
- e. People might get tired of hearing you talk about how Jesus saved you, but for the most part they're going to tolerate it because it's your testimony, and if it works for you, fine.
- f. That doesn't mean it has to work for them.
- g. This also doesn't mean that we don't need to share our stories of redemption with others.
- h. Revelation 12:11 says that we overcome by the word of our testimony
- i. And yet, simply telling unbelievers what Jesus did for you might be enough to help you overcome, but it won't necessarily be what helps them overcome.
- j. Paul shared his testimony with the Jews and it barely moved the needle as far as a reaction.

3. **The Jews could tolerate Paul's divine encounters (verses 12-16)**

- a. So Paul stepped it up a bit.
- b. He didn't just leave it at his salvation experience, but he went on to share one of his divine encounters
- c. We love to tell these kind of stories, and yet we often have the same response as Paul did - crickets chirping in the background!
- d. Once again, the crowd showed great tolerance as Paul shared about Ananias being led to him and praying for his sight
- e. Even when Paul shared in verse 15 that God called him to "be his witness to ALL men of what you have seen and heard" the Jews didn't freak.
- f. What does this mean for us? Simply that while it might be exciting for us to talk to each other about these kinds of encounters, it isn't necessarily going to create a reaction among the people who need Jesus.
- g. It's good to have divine encounters, and it's good to talk about them.
- h. But it only goes so far with unbelievers.
- i. And that leads us to the one thing that the Jews could not tolerate, and it starts in verse 17.

4. **The Jews couldn't tolerate Paul's call to the Gentiles (verses 17-21)**

- a. Paul starts sharing another spiritual experience - one that shouldn't have bothered the Jews anymore than the ones he'd already shared - but something about this one caused a reaction
- b. What was it? Verse 21 - Paul's call to the Gentiles
- c. Verse 22 says that the crowd listened to Paul (they tolerated him) until he said that, but the mention of taking the good news to Gentiles sent them into a frenzy
- d. Why? Because the Jews couldn't tolerate the idea of "those people" being redeemed by God
- e. Remember our Big Idea? We tolerate what doesn't agitate.
- f. Agitate sounds like a negative word, but it basically means "to stir up"
- g. When you and I share the gospel - the true gospel - it will stir things up in others
- h. John 1:5 tells us that the light shines in the world and the darkness cannot overcome it (although it will try!)

The Landing

Let me make a few statements that will hopefully help us wrap our brains around this teaching, because if we don't apply it practically, we will simply walk away thinking it was "a good word"

Our goal is not toleration by the world. Our goal is the salvation of the world.

- this is critical, because so many times we think we've arrived just because we don't seem to be bothering others
- if the world is tolerating us, we aren't sharing the whole gospel

Jesus isn't just my Lord, your Lord or our Lord. He is THE LORD.

- ultimately, this is what sent the Jews over the edge with Paul
- they saw God as a Jewish God ("our God")
- when we see Jesus as only our Lord, we don't stir up his Lordship over other people's situations
- sharing with others that Jesus wants to be their Lord causes a reaction because men don't typically want to give up their rights or change how they're living

God's way rubs man's way the wrong way.

- if we're honest, many times God chooses people and plans that aren't the people and plans we would have chosen

- we can fake it and act like we're ok with it, but it's better to understand the truth that there will be times that the people God saves could bother us
- but when we understand that God's plan is to save men from every tribe, nation and tongue, we begin to realize that his way is so much better than ours (Isaiah 55:8)
- our way would result in a church that looks just like us, and that would look exactly the opposite of heaven (see Revelation 7:9-10)

The only right response to agitation is medication.

- in other words, we give grace
- if you have an irritation on your skin, you put ointment on it
- in the same way, when we see the gospel message of Jesus being Lord over all beginning to agitate and irritate others, we respond with grace
- Ephesians 2:4-8 mentions 3 times that grace is how God responded to us, and it's how we respond to others, too

We read John 13:35 last week, but it would be good for us to read it again this week and to really get what it says - and what it doesn't say

Jesus told his disciples - which is all of us in here that are followers of Jesus - that there was one thing that would prove to the world that they were really following him.

He didn't say they would know it because of how hard the disciples worked, or because of their amazing testimonies or even because of almost unbelievable stories of divine God moments.

All of those things are good, but none of those things are good enough to show that we're his disciples.

The only real proof is that we love - truly love - one another.

And when the world sees that, they won't sit back and simply tolerate it. They will notice it, and as a result, they will see Jesus in us.

And that has been and will always be the goal.