

# Seeking Answers

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**Q. Am I called to accept everyone? What does that mean? How can I be accepting if someone chooses to act in a way that I find, well, unacceptable?**

**A.** We are more and more exposed to different ways of thinking and behaving, and many people are also becoming more uncertain of their own convictions. In light of this, wouldn't the best possible route be to make acceptance our basic approach to all people and cultures?

On the surface this seems to make sense. It was the general approach of the crew of the Starship Enterprise. Captain Kirk or Mr. Spock could never interfere with the development of another culture, even at the cost of their own lives. They were not to introduce knowledge, technology or strength to any society they encountered in their voyages.

This "prime directive" seems to be the most respectful way to treat a culture, philosophy or person different from one's own.

One of the problems with "acceptance" as the universal rule, however, is that it makes no distinctions. Yes, there are differences between cultures that I ought to accept. For example, I may travel to a country where I don't like the style of food, but there is nothing inherently wrong with the spices, cooking procedure or style of the meal.

But, there are also differences between cultures that I ought not to accept. For example, I might meet a group of cannibals; that particular kind of food is not merely "not my taste," but one that ought not to be accepted.

## **Morality or custom?**

What is the difference?

In many cases, it has to do with a distinction between morality and custom. Morals are based on reality, on what is true. They are not invented but discovered.

For example, it is true that human life has intrinsic value, therefore I may never take an innocent human life. Customs, on the other hand, are the result of varying social circumstances. They are not necessarily based on what is true; they are based on what the community prefers.

If it is only our "custom" to consider human life to have inherent value, then there is nothing intrinsically wrong with murder or genocide; we merely happen not to prefer it.

It may be customary to tip your waitress no less than 10 percent of your dinner bill, but it is moral for her to earn a living wage. One is based on our societal norms, and the other is based on what is good for a human being.

Therefore, I can (and possibly must) accept differences in cultural and personal norms of behavior when they do not violate a moral ideal, even if I don't like those customs. But, I do not have to accept bad behavior.



Father Michael Schmitz

While it may be common or customary for many people to get fall-down drunk and behave poorly at wedding receptions, no one has to accept that kind of behavior as being morally good.

Another distinction that acceptance fails to make is the difference between acknowledgment and approval. If my adult children choose to leave the Church and no longer practice the faith, I may have to “face facts” and acknowledge that reality. But, I do not have to approve of that choice.

I may have to tolerate some bad choices or behavior on the part of my neighbor, but that is not the same as believing that there is no difference between good and evil choices. It also does not mean that there is no moment when those choices ought not to be tolerated.

For example, a husband may tolerate his wife’s drinking. He may put up with her choices, but that tolerance has a limit. If her choices reached the point where they were disastrous to her or to their family, he may cease to tolerate this particular choice and stage an intervention.

Note: we only tolerate beliefs and behaviors we dislike or see as wrong. We don’t “tolerate” someone’s honesty or generosity, but we may have to tolerate a certain degree of manipulation or selfishness in our companions.

Tolerance merely means that we may patiently endure another’s choice of the wrong for the sake of a greater right. For example, one may allow a child to use money foolishly in order for the child to learn its value. But, we don’t have to tolerate the violation of a greater good for the sake of a lesser good; it would be wrong to tolerate abortion, which violates the right to life, for the sake of an individual’s right to privacy.

### **A greater good**

We accept differences in customs, cultures and individuals provided that they do not violate moral norms. We tolerate some beliefs and actions that are wrong or bothersome to the degree that this tolerance is needed to preserve the common good.

But when it comes to people, we are called to something more than acceptance or tolerance. I don’t have to accept a person’s behavior or lifestyle, but if I belong to Jesus, then I am called to more, not less. I am not called to merely accept them, I am called to love them.

Christians are not called to avoid having enemies; we will always have enemies if we are real Christians. We are called to love those enemies.

This is more difficult than accepting or tolerating our enemies because it means that Christians have to walk the difficult road of looking through beliefs or behaviors and seeing the person.

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