

Half Truths

“Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin”

[Matthew 7:1-5](#)

“Love the sinner, hate the sin.” This last statement that we are going to look at today, wrapping up our 5-part sermon series called Half Truths, sounds so right that you may be wondering what could possibly be wrong with it. Like the previous four statements that we have examined thus far, this is a phrase that is very popular among Christians. It is said so often that people believe it is from the Bible, and even associate it with Jesus himself. But, the truth is that Jesus never said these words. The statement is not found elsewhere in the Bible, either. Well, if this is the case, where did “Love the sinner, hate the sin” come from?

This popular phrase seems to have originated with St. Augustine, a bishop from North Africa, who was one of the early church fathers of the Western Church. In a letter he wrote to nuns, he called them to have “love for mankind and hatred of sins.” Later, Mahatma Gandhi wrote something similar to this in his 1929 autobiography. He said, “Hate the sin and not the sinner is a precept which, though easy enough to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world.”

If we look at the statement carefully, the first half of the statement, “Love the sinner,” is actually true. It is the message of the New Testament, and what Jesus consistently demonstrated in his ministry. We know that this was one of the main criticisms that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law had against Jesus. He welcomed sinners and ate with them. He was in their company so often, that they even called him a friend of sinners. In response to their criticism, Jesus says in Mark 2:17, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” However, while Jesus said he came to call sinners onto himself and certainly demonstrated that he loved sinners, he never actually commanded us to “love the sinner.” What he said instead was “love your neighbor.”

As Jesus made clear through the parable of the Good Samaritan, your neighbor is not necessarily someone you know but *anyone* who simply needs your help. To love someone as your neighbor does not mean that you have warm feelings toward them. It does not mean that you display a personal like for them, either. What it does mean is that you are moved into action. We are called to see the needs of those we encounter with eyes of kindness and compassion and commit to doing good for them.

So, when you bought Christmas gifts for children in need, when you gave your change to the Super Bowl Drive our youth held last Sunday, you were showing your love to neighbors. When you cook for the homeless or serve them on the third Sunday of the month, you love your neighbors. When you donate children’s books for the library boxes we built and continue to maintain, you love your neighbors. When you make prayer shawls for others, you love your neighbors. When you read books to Rosemary School children who need your help, you love your neighbors. When you volunteers at the hospital or nursing home, you love your neighbors. When you visit the incarcerated through the prison ministry, you love our neighbors. And when our offerings through the apportionment giving are distributed to help people in need in our nation and in the world, we are answering Jesus’ call to love our neighbors.

This is not all that Jesus asks us to do, however. The neighbors we are called upon to love includes our enemies. We must seek and do good for them, too. Our enemies are people who have wronged us, people who might not do unto us as they wish others would do toward them. Jesus said not to return evil for evil. We are called to sow love where there is hate. When we show love to our enemies, when we return forgiveness and love for evil and hatred, we become instruments of God's peace. We surrender ourselves in faith to the possibilities for reconciliation and transformed situations and relationships. We place our hopes in God who makes all things new.

Well, you may be wondering, what then is the problem with the statement, "Love the sinner?" The problem is not with "Love of the sinner." It is with the fact that it creates a mentality of us vs. them, right vs. wrong. I am the righteous, and you are the sinner! The statement leads us into putting ourselves in a position of seeing others as sinners. Though our Christian confession is that we are all sinners, by labeling the other person as a sinner, we condemn his or her sin as worse than our own. By labeling the other person as a sinner, we judge the person and focus on his or her sin, instead of our own.

In the gospel of Luke, chapter 18, Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who went up to the Temple to pray. The Pharisees were religious leaders who were strict in their devotion to the Mosaic Law. They worked hard to overcome sin, so that they could live a pure and and holy life. To keep this purity, they kept a safe distance away from sinners, those they deemed "unclean". Tax collectors were the opposite kind of people. They were considered the worst sinners. Jesus tells us that the Pharisee stood in the Temple and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like everyone else - crooks, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive." (Luke 18:10)

Luke says, "Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust." (Luke 18:9) Have you ever met these kinds of holier-than-thou people? If we are being honest, perhaps, we have all held ourselves to be just a bit holier than this or that person.

In today's scripture, Jesus warns his disciples against judgmentalism. In doing so, he uses such a vivid metaphor doesn't he? Why are you trying to take out a splinter in your brother's or sister's eye when you have a log in your own eye? Have you pictured it? It's comical and absurd! But, that is exactly what we do when we sit in God's judgment seat and lord ourselves over others by pronouncing their guilt. And it is this tendency to judge that is often at the heart of the statement, "Love the sinner."

Let's move to the second part of the statement: "hate the sin." At first, these words seem biblical, too. They sound like something Jesus would have said, don't they? In his ministry, Jesus spent time with many different kinds of sinners - drunkards, prostitutes, adulterers, thieves, tax collectors. Not only were they in his company, they were considered his friends. Yet, in all that time Jesus spent with them, he never mentioned to them, "You know, I love you, but I really hate your sin." He never said that! Instead of their sins, he talked about God's forgiveness. In fact, the only times he gets worked up about sin are when it involves religious hypocrisy! When people claim to know that *they* know the ways of God and in the process exclude others from God's Kingdom, this is when Jesus expresses rebuke.

According to a recent Barna study, religious hypocrisy is among the top reasons why people, especially Millennials, have stopped attending church. What turns people off is when Christians act as if they are always right, while pointing out the sins of others. Many years ago when my daughter, Hanna was a college student, she came back home from the gym one day quite upset. She said there was an old lady at the gym, and she was rather mean to her. Hanna had some of her clothes on the floor, and the lady did not like it. She grumbled about it, and Hanna immediately apologized to her and gathered up her clothes. But, the lady kept going, criticizing the bad manners of young people. Hanna ended her story with a rather shocking statement. She said, "And I am sure she was a good Christian." Someone who is quick to point out the sins and mistakes of others, someone who is slow or unwilling to forgive -- these were her perceptions of a Christian . . .

Brothers and Sisters, let me be clear. Of course, we should not be silent about the problem of sin. There are sins that we must absolutely denounce: sins that harm and oppress others, such as child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, racism, homophobia and injustice. We need to resist these sins and stand up for their victims. Proverbs 31:8 says, "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable."

However, when we use the statement, "love the sinner, hate the sin," we are usually not talking about protecting the oppressed or speaking out on behalf of the vulnerable. Unfortunately, this statement is often used when we talk about issues of morality. Particularly, moral issues that we have a problem against. I hear it most often with the issue of homosexuality. Those saying "love the sinner, hate the sin," are defining LGBTQ persons as sinners and their lifestyle as sinful act.

What happens when "gay" becomes used interchangeably with "sinner"? We create an artificial wall between us and them that does not exist in the eyes of God. There is no olympic podium that we stand upon before God. We don't get a gold medal for being less of a sinner than someone else. What happens is that the log in our eye prevents us from welcoming all those who seek the healing and restoration of Jesus Christ into his body, the Church. "Love the sinner, hate the sin" keeps people away from the Christian community and in the shadows.

Friends, I believe the only part of the statement, "Love the sinner, hate the sin" that is worth saving is the first word, "Love." It is the word we are to have in our mind when we see someone behaving in the ways we don't approve of or think is sin. Jesus loved the person enough to die for him or her. Are we to be better than the One we confess as our Lord and Savior? Let us love one another, demonstrating humility and grace towards all those we encounter along the way.

Thanks be to God! Amen.