



Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

Matthew 7:1-5

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Over the past few weeks we've been looking at Christian clichés that have long been used as an attempt to offer comfort to people in difficult times. Today, we take up one of the more popular phrases in Christian lingo to consider its place in our vocabulary. It's a saying that seems to embody the spirit of God's love, while laying claim to God's dislike of our failure to maintain God's law. Today, we consider the phrase, *Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin*.

Many a faithful Christian use this phrase to call attention to God's invitation to us to offer love to all people, even if we take issue with their thoughts, actions and lifestyles. It is used by well-meaning people, Christ-centered people, God-fearing people. Many use this phrase because they believe it to be found in the Scriptures; perhaps many more use it because they believe Jesus said it himself (or at least it was implied in his teachings).

Let's set the record straight this morning. This phrase is not found anywhere in the scriptures. Jesus never said it. And, as I will seek to articulate today, it's not even reflective of the way Jesus taught or lived. *Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin* is, in short, not only absent from the Biblical word, it's antithetical to faithful living according to the teachings of Scripture, and it should be scraped from our vocabulary.

You may wonder, if it's not Biblical in nature, from where did such a phrase come? There are two suggested places of origin for this phrase.ⁱ The saying seems to first originate from the writings of St. Augustine, a bishop in North Africa, who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.ⁱⁱ Perhaps the saying is more well known from Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, published in 1929. While often quoted as having written, "hate the sin and not the sinner," a fuller reading of his text reveals that what Gandhi said was, "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." Even out of Gandhi's acknowledgment that such a phrase breeds hatred, many pull out of his writing the small subset that seemingly allows for such hatred.

The greatest challenge this saying presents is that it assumes we all have a shared, agreed upon, and universal understanding of what constitutes as sin. If we go back to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament, we'll find that the words translated into English as 'sin,' have a similar meaning that suggests one has 'missed the mark,' or 'strayed from the path.' More broadly, *sin* is often defined as anything that separates us from God.

Throughout the history of the church, the role of the pastor has often focused on helping the congregant understand sin. The teaching model has been defined as hell-fire and brimstone, because if you don't turn from your sin, assuredly, hell-fire would be your only reward. By teaching about sin at large and sinful acts more specifically, the pastor is able to articulate what a person should *not* do. Such a model is still prevalent in the world today, but there is a growing model in the world today in which many pastors focus less on calling out your sinful tendencies, and focus much more on teaching faithfulness. Instead of telling you what *not* to do, a growing number focus more on examining what one *should* be doing.

Along with a lessening focus from the pulpit on what constitutes as sin, we also experienced a great spread in Christianity throughout the world. Globalization – the spread of Christianity to a broad range of cultures – has certainly aided in the lack of agreement regarding what is and isn't defined as sinful. At the time of Jesus' teaching ministry, you had the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple who was given final say. As the Christian Church grew, the Apostle Paul became a central authority for instructing new believers in right from wrong. As the Catholic Church was made the national church of the Roman Empire, the Pope was given authority to have final say over what was and what was not sinful. Then we encountered the split between the Orthodox and Catholic branches of Christianity, and then the Protestant Reformation, and we still see the spread of Christianity around the globe. There is no longer a central authority over the diverse world of Christendom that has final say over what is and what is not sinful.

Today, we have no general consensus of what constitutes as sin. We have a shared belief regarding some things, for the Bible does offer some instruction about what we should and should not do. But do not have a dictionary that lists all sins from which to qualify if someone is committing a sin. The Bible, for all it contains in teaching us God's will, does not tell us *everything* we want to know about defining sinfulness today.

Just one example: I was talking to someone recently about tweeting in church. I was encouraging their using of Twitter while in church to share with the world what they were hearing and experiencing in worship. They questioned whether such an act would be considered right or wrong. Can you really use your cellphone to tweet while in worship? Unfortunately, nowhere in the Old or New Testament is social media use covered. I've looked; I promise, it's not there. I was quite shocked to find that in his three years of recorded ministry, Jesus never spoke about Twitter. ... Are there people who would say tweeting in worship is an insult to God and sinful? I'm sure there are. Do I think that spreading the good news of Christ, even if it means using social media while in worship is ok? Absolutely!

We don't have consensus of the full list of individual acts or the broader lifestyles that are defined by God as sinful and which are not. So, the first problem with this saying is that to say *Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin* is to assume you have better knowledge than the person you're speaking of in regards to the sin in their life. And God says, the only person who knows the fullness of the Divine will, is God.

The next problem we encounter with this saying is that it doesn't really jive with Christ's teachings. To be fair, saying "Love the sinner" isn't necessarily out of line with Jesus' lived witness. Jesus does offer us a living example of offering love to sinners. Jesus healed sinners, he ate with sinners, he hung out with sinners, he intentionally stopped to greet and have conversations with people in the community who were outcasts because of their sinful lives. But Jesus never actually says these words, 'Love the sinner.' Instead, what Jesus does say is, "Love your neighbor." Let's look at this closer ...

Jesus doesn't offer a lot of instruction about what acts make someone a sinner. There are a few things he names specifically, like anger and lust. And there are a few occasions when Jesus, having been in conversation with someone condemned of sin by others, says to the person something like, "You are forgiven. Go and sin no more," indicating that perhaps what they had been doing should have been understood as sinful. But Jesus doesn't spend a lot of time calling out people as sinners.

I think that's intentional. Think about it ... if Jesus had said, "Love the sinner," wouldn't that give us permission to focus on what makes someone else a sinner? We'd walk around wondering about the people around us, pondering the sins of everyone else. The first thing you'd do when you met someone is wonder, what's your sin? Perhaps we do this in many ways already. Globally, we make assumptions about others, and our assumptions define for us how we treat them.

Republican, Democrat, divorced, single, lawyer, preacher, homeless, wealthy, black, white, northerner, southerner, immigrant, citizen, Christian, Muslim ... every word we use to define someone else alters our impression of them, for better or for worse. Jesus knew that if he had told us to love all the sinners, all we'd do is focus on people's sins. And for Christ, our job isn't to focus on people's sins. I mean, imagine if we replaced 'sinner' with any of the multitude of words we use when *othering* people around us. "Love the Democrat, hate their Liberalism," or "Love the Caucasian, hate their whiteness," or "Love the extrovert, hate their outgoingness." At best, these don't make sense, and at their worst, they're offensive.

That's why Jesus doesn't say 'love the sinner,' Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor. When instructing the temple leaders about the greatest commandment, Jesus says we are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. One of the leaders asks him, "And who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus tells him the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells the story about a man beaten by robbers, but he doesn't say anything about the man. We don't know why he was beaten; we don't know his faith; we don't know where he was from; we just know he was jumped and beaten.

We are then told about the Priest and the Levite, considered the righteous leaders of the faith. By definition, these men knew what is right and wrong, and yet they walked on by on the other side of the road, unwilling to help the man. Then we are told about the Samaritan, a man who was considered an outcast by the Jewish community. By definition, the Samaritan would have been unlikely to help the hurting man. But the Samaritan was the one who was willing to look

beyond any social structures of the time; he was the one who was willing to see the person hurting as a neighbor in need instead of some outcast sinner who didn't deserve to be helped. The Samaritan was the one praised by Christ as living rightly.

"[When we live by the mantra, *Love the Sinner,*] we put ourselves in a position of seeing others as sinners rather than neighbors, and though we may emphasize that we are also sinners, our focus on the other as sinner rather than as neighbor defines our relationship."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus simply teaches, and so we must accept, our call is to "Love your neighbor."

The second half of our saying also falls short of compliance with Scriptural teaching. "Hate the sin" seeks to name that we should not just disapprove of another's sins, but that we should have hatred for their sin. This brings up a number of issues. First, we've just cycled back to the prevailing problem, which says we have the full knowledge of God to define what is and what isn't sin. To claim we can define for another person their sin is to put ourselves in God's shoes as the judge of creation, and there are a lot of places in the Bible where such a mentality is called unfaithful and wrong.

A second problem is that we're never instructed to garner hatred for sin. In Romans, Paul comes close. Paul says, "Love should be genuine; hate what is *evil*, hold fast to what is good."^{iv} However, again, the larger context is important. Read in full, we find the instructions aren't to hate the sin present in other people's lives – the instructions are to hate evil so that in your own life, you won't give in to the temptations of evil. The instructions here have nothing to do with your feelings toward another person, or what another person says and does, they are all about how you handle yourself in regards to the invitation of evil to turn from God.

To be clear, rejecting the saying *hate the sin* is by no means encouraging or condoning sin. But it takes us to Matthew's writing in today's scriptural text. Jesus says quite plainly, "Do not judge." Again, going back to my opening premise, "Jesus' command against rendering judgment may issue from the recognition that human beings rarely possess sufficient evidence and / or information to draw accurate conclusions about one another."^v

Such a teaching by Christ is not far-off from most of his teachings, which demand a self-sacrificial faith that calls for picking up our own cross and carrying it, and laying our own life down for the life of another. "Jesus names [our] tendency to establish [our] own superiority by calling attention to the faults of the other."^{vi} It is, but another way, of *othering* the people around us. By tearing them down, we lift ourselves up. Our desire to call out the sin of others stems from our own self-righteousness, which originates from a self-deception that convinces us we have our own lives so perfectly in order, or even well-enough in order, that we can begin to call out the failures of others. It would be like me saying, "I think I'm a pretty good dad, but that guy need some parenting help." Or perhaps you're sitting in the office wondering, "I get all my work done on time, but that woman over there is a detriment to our business. She's always late."

Jesus' debunks this thought, and calls us out – how can you take the speck out of the eye of your neighbor when you have a log in your own eye? He uses hyperbole because sometimes what we need is exaggerated language to understand the will and nature of God.

So, what's the better way? If *Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin* is not reflective of God's will, or Christ's teaching, is there a more faithful calling for how to live in relationship with others?

Some would say the best thing to do is to stop at the first word. Just *Love*. That's a good call, but I think it's a bit insufficient. Just as we don't agree on what constitutes as sin, we also don't agree on what makes up love. Some say that to love others, we have to fix them and name for them the sin in which they live. This again falls back into the trap of judging others and assuming you know best what separates others from God. Instead of seeking to find the faults in the lives of others, and loving them none-the-less, perhaps we should focus on our own lives, and live in such a way that people around us would see the love of God at work in and through us. Perhaps the call is not to offer love, at least not in our broken ways. Maybe the call is to let God be God, and since God is love, perhaps it is best we let God shine through our lives that the love of God may be made complete in us. For in doing so, we look a lot more like Christ, who, because of the love of God in him, not only welcomed, dined, and walked with those the world outcast as sinners, but he gave his life that sinners like you me could be in community with one another, forgiven and redeemed. So hear this promise, *You are loved, that you may be love*. May the witness of your life to God's love be received by all in the world around you. Amen.

ⁱ Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

ⁱⁱ St. Augustine, in writing instructions for faithful living to the nuns, wrote that there should be "a love for mankind and a hatred for sins."

ⁱⁱⁱ Hamilton.

^{iv} Romans 12:9. NRSV.

^v Mark A Lomax. *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

^{vi} Peter Rhea Jones. *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.