

# Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

## 2/7/2016

### Matthew 7:1-5

Today we come to close of this series on half-truths or Christian clichés which many well-intentioned Christians often say. We mean well when we say them, they even sound Biblical, but when we look into them we realize they miss the mark. Like the other clichés we've studied, today's phrase sounds so very right it's hard to imagine what could possibly be wrong with it. Let's review the sermon series titles together:

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON

GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES

GOD WON'T GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE

GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT and today's message

LOVE THE SINNER, HATE THE SIN

Many who say this phrase mean it to be gracious and kind and to have it reflect their love of people. But the reality is, when I'm busy hating all your sin, it's hard for me to love you and it's hard for you to feel loved when I'm pointing out your sin.

Jesus did not say this phrase and, as we'll see in a moment, this does not reflect the kinds of things Jesus said. It was Saint Augustine, the 4th and early 5th century bishop from northern Africa who seems to have first said something like this. He was writing a letter to nuns asking them to help each other remain chaste. I'm told that Gandhi said something similar in his 1929 autobiography. His version said, "Hate the sin, love the sinner." ...

Let's begin by thinking about the definition of sin. In the Old Testament there are a variety of words that are translated by the word sin. Most frequently used is the verb CHATA. The New Testament was written in Greek and the most frequently used word for sin there is HAMARTIA. Both of these words mean "To miss the mark or to stray from the path." So in both Testaments we find this definition that sin is to miss the mark or stray from path that is God's intention or will for us. Sin is the word that can apply to any thought, word or deed. We sin by things we've done – like actively doing something that hurts another person. This is known as sins of commission – direct action on our part. And we sin by things we have left undone – like when we should have done something to help another person, but we don't. This is a sin of omission – things we should have done, but didn't. Here we recognize that we all sin, so we are all sinners. The Bible is clear about that as Paul writes:

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We all need forgiveness and salvation. We all sin.

But is it true, as some Christians say, that all sins are equal in the site of God? The answer is it is not true, that is not a Biblical statement. And our common sense tells us: no, not all sin is equal. Eating a dozen Krispy Kreme donuts in one sitting is an act of gluttony which is listed as one of the seven deadly sins. Is that equal in God's eyes to getting drunk and driving, potentially killing someone else? Is swearing on the golf course equal to falsely accusing another of a crime and seeing them go to prison? Is cheating in a game of cards the same in God's eyes as cheating on your spouse?...

Speaking of the seven deadly sins – these were known as deadly because every other sin arises from them. Let's recall them:

1. Lust
2. Gluttony
3. Greed
4. Sloth
5. Wrath
6. Envy
7. Pride

And do you know which one the church said is most dangerous to your soul?

It's pride. It wasn't lust or gluttony or greed. The most serious of these sins is pride because all of the others rise up from that one root sin.

That takes me to our final half-truth in this series: the Christian cliché I'd love to encourage you to scrub from your speech. Let's say it again, perhaps for the last time in our lives: LOVE THE SINNER, HATE THE SIN.

Let's start with "love the sinner." On the one hand, this is of course such a critical part of Jesus' life and ministry. If we could stop here, I think the statement would be true. Jesus ministered to sinners, spent time with sinners; in fact he was called a friend of sinners. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:15: "This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'—and I'm the biggest sinner of all."

Yet even here there is a bit of danger with this phrase. Jesus never said, “Love the sinner.” He did say: “LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR,” and your neighbor is anyone who needs you, and even those you haven’t met but who need your help. The people receiving your SouperBowl Soup Drive donations you’ve brought for the Food Panty, though you don’t know their names, you’ve never met them, they are your neighbor, and loving them means doing good to them, seeking to bless them and encourage them and to show kindness to them though they have no right to claim this from you.

Jesus not only said, “Love your neighbor,” he also said, “LOVE YOUR ENEMIES.” These are people who have wronged you. Love for both neighbor and enemy is not a warm fuzzy feeling, but the act of seeking the good of the other. And Jesus teaches us that when we love our neighbor and love our enemies, the world changes. When you return blessing for evil the world has the possibility of changing. But one thing Jesus never commanded his disciples to do was to “Love the sinner.”

Why not? Two reasons, I think. First, the neighbor and the enemy are both sinners. There was no need to tell us to love sinners; it was redundant. Every sinner is my neighbor, and some are also my enemy. Telling us to love our neighbor and even our enemy covers just about everyone.

But more than this, I think Jesus knew that the moment he commanded his disciples to “love the sinner” they would begin focusing on what was wrong with the other person, looking for the sin of others....if I’m focused on loving you, a sinner, then I’m focused on your sin. I’m thinking, “YOU are a sinner, but I’m graciously choosing to love you anyway.”... We become judgemental and focus on their sins, the sins we used to commit or those sins which are different from ours. Jesus knew we had this tendency to judge.

This is what can happen to Christians after they become Christians they start to judge others. That is the basis for our main scripture this morning:

Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' when there's a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye".

A better statement than Love the sinner, hate the sin would be "Love your neighbor in spite of the fact that you're a sinner."

Now, let's consider the second half of this statement. It's the part that makes me uncomfortable: HATE THE SIN.

Jesus routinely spends time with drunkards, prostitutes, thieves, the occasional adulterer, traitors to their own people, and countless people who undoubtedly had impure thoughts, cheated on their taxes, had committed a variety of crimes, yet you never hear Jesus speaking of hating the sins of these people. You will never hear him tell people, "I love you, but I hate your sin."

The only times that Jesus seems to hate sin is when it is committed by religious leaders. He hated the people ripping off the poor as they came to worship at the temple by charging them exorbitant rates to exchange their currency or to buy animals to sacrifice to God. He hated it when the religious leaders practiced hypocrisy, seeking to put a woman caught in the act of adultery to death. Can you picture this? She's been caught in the bedroom, I imagine her dragged outside wrapped in the bedsheets and thrown on the ground at Jesus feet. She's sobbing, she's humiliated and she's afraid; because they have rocks in their hands.

The Pharisee's are trying to test Jesus because they know he is a friend of sinners. What's he going to do – the laws says that she has to be stoned to death, “what are you going to do Jesus? She was caught in the very act of adultery”. Jesus goes to his knees and begins writing in the sand – don't you wish you knew what he was writing, but I don't think they were happy thoughts. And then he looks at them and says this very famous statement,

“Let the one among you who is without sin, throw the first stone.” And one by one you can imagine hearing the sound of the stones hitting the ground with a thud as they all walk away. And Jesus turns to the woman and lifts her up and says, “Is there no one to condemn you? Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” He offered her mercy. This is how Jesus does it.

He denounced the religious leaders as “scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites!” for their religious pride and the way they pretended to be something they were not. But Jesus preaches against the ordinary sinners who have come to listen to and learn about God from him. He was calling them to mercy and to walk a different path.

< Cartoon – being a jerk about it >

As Christians we sometimes skip the “not being a jerk about it” part when we point out the sins of others. Here's what I know – I have enough sin in my own life to focus on, that I don't have the time or energy to point out yours.

There are sins we must hate and denounce—sins that harm, oppress or do evil to others. Child abuse, spousal abuse, racism, injustice, the fact that children die of starvation in our world of plenty—there is an appropriate righteous indignation over these things. But generally when we say, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” we're not referring to this kind of sin....

Where I hear this statement, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” used most often today is with regard to homosexuality. As a society we’re divided about the question of same-sex marriage, just as Christians are in the church. There are a handful of scriptures from Moses and Paul that clearly disapprove of some form of same-sex practice observed in the times in which they lived. Did what they write capture how God looks at his gay and lesbian children? Or were these verses like those Moses and Paul wrote about slavery, or the subordination of women, which we do not believe capture God’s will? That’s the question, and Christians disagree.

But what we do agree upon, I hope, is the clarity around Christ’s call to love one another. Which is what Jesus repeatedly demonstrates to sinners....And it is what I’m asking of you as a congregation – can we love one another and any who come to our church?

One Sunday, a gay couple that had been visiting Church of the Resurrection UMC came up to Pastor Adam after worship. They said, “We were sitting in the sanctuary during worship, and at one point we were holding hands. One of your older members leaned forward and handed us a note. We thought you’d want to see it.” His mind began to race thinking of what might be on that note.

The note from the woman behind them said something to the effect of, “I just want you to know that you are welcome here and I’m really glad you chose to worship with us today.” It was signed by a long-time member of the church, a woman in her 70’s whose deep faith in Jesus, Christian character and service to others is above reproach.

The truth in “Love the sinner, hate the sin” stops at the first word of that phrase. That first word is so true it captures the defining characteristic of the Christian life. Let’s say it together: Love

## **Matthew 7:1-5**

[Jesus said to them,] “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye.”