

**Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin,
Half-Truths: Things You Only Thought Were In the Bible, Part 6**

Luke 18:10-14; Matthew 7:1-5

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

Today we arrive at number six in our series of sermons,
“Half-Truths: Things You Only Thought Were in the Bible.”

And number six is one that is heard frequently these days.

Like some of the other sayings we have considered, this one sounds so right that it is hard to imagine what could possibly be wrong with it.

In some circles—

mostly among fundamentalist and conservative Christians—

this saying is a way of registering discomfort with and disapproval of
members of the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender community.

And like the other sayings we have considered,
you will hear these words spoken with the best of intentions.

Many who use this saying intend to be kind, gracious and loving.

Adam Hamilton tells of one woman who felt so strongly about this expression that she had it tattooed on her arm:

“Love the sinner, hate the sin.”

II

Like the other half-truths in this series, some Christians believe the statement is found in scripture, and perhaps even is a statement of Jesus himself.

Yet Jesus never said this, nor does the sentiment behind it reflect the kinds of things he said.

So where did this saying come from?

A variation of it seems to have originated with St. Augustine, the Bishop of North Africa, who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries AD.

Augustine wrote a letter to an order of nuns asking them to remain chaste and called on them to have a “love for humankind and hatred of sins.”

However, it’s doubtful that Augustine intended to coin a phrase that Christians in the 21st century would use to describe their dislike of someone else’s sins.

Gandhi wrote something similar in his 1929 autobiography, but he added an important caveat.

Most readers stop at his quote: “Hate the sin and not the sinner,”
but the full statement reads:

“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.”

It seems obvious that Gandhi was not advocating for this half-truth, but was observing that most people find it hard to hate the sin without harming the sinner.

III

In order for us to gain a theological perspective that can help us evaluate the saying “love the sinner, hate the sin,” we need to begin with a basic question:

What is sin, biblically speaking?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, a variety of words are translated as the English word *sin*, most frequent among them the Hebrew noun *chatta'ah*.

In the New Testament, the most common Greek word for sin is *hamartia*.

Both of these words have the essential meaning of “to miss the mark” or “to stray from the path,” where the mark or path is God’s intention or will for us.

So sin can apply to any thought, word, or deed that is contrary to God’s intention for humankind.

It can also apply to a failure to act or do something we should do,
as when we see someone who is hurting or in need and don’t stop to help.

Fact is, we all sin—none of us lives a perfect life.

We think, say, and do things we should not,
and we fail to think, say, and do things we should.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul states it this way:

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (3:23)

Later in Romans, Paul speaks of the struggles we all face in doing the right things and refraining from doing the wrong things:

“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”
(7:19)

So we need to recognize that the first part of this half-truth is actually true.

We are, of course, called to love sinners!

It’s a message we encounter in the New Testament over and over.

Jesus did it all the time, and he was called the 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.’

Then he adds, *And I’m the biggest sinner of all.*

If Jesus didn't love sinners, he didn't love us.

IV

The problem is—
 and the danger for us—
 is that the statement, “love the sinner,”
 while true as far as it goes,
 is not what Jesus commanded us to do.

It can actually lead us to sinning by violating something Jesus did teach.

Though Jesus certainly loved sinners,
 he never actually said, “Love the sinner.”

What he did say (and this is an important distinction) is **“Love your neighbor.”**

When Jesus was questioned as to what were the two greatest commandments, he answered,

“Love the Lord your God...and love your neighbor as yourself.”

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan he made clear that your neighbor is anyone you meet,

and even those you haven't met,
 who need your help.

When we donate to the One Great Hour of Sharing or the Pentecost offering,
 we are showing love to neighbors we will probably never meet.

When our offerings help people who have been affected by natural disasters,
 whether in our nation or another,

we are answering the call to love our neighbors—
 fellow human beings who, like us, are children of God.

To love them as neighbors does not mean we necessarily have warm feelings for them.

It doesn't even mean that we have to like them.

It means doing good to them...seeking to bless and encourage them.

It means showing kindness to them,
even though they have no right to claim it from us.

Jesus, of course, goes even further in explaining who our neighbors are.

He expressly commands us to love our enemies—
people who have wronged us,
people who have not done unto us
as they wish others would do toward them.

We are to love our enemies because Jesus teaches that when we do,
the world changes.

For when we love our enemies,
when we return blessings for evil,
we create possibilities for transformed situations and relationships.

V

So if we are called to love our neighbors and our enemies,
why doesn't Jesus ever say, "Love the sinner"?

First and most basically, such a command would be redundant,
since the neighbor and the enemy are both sinners.

Every sinner is my neighbor,
and so also is my enemy.

Since all of us are sinners, telling us to love our neighbors already covers
everyone!

More importantly, I think Jesus knew that if he commanded his disciples to "love
the sinner,"

they would probably begin looking at other people more as sinners than as neighbors.

That would inevitably lead to judgment.

If I love you more as a sinner than as my neighbor,
then I am bound to focus more on what I perceive to be your sin.

I will start looking for all the things that are wrong with you.

And perhaps without intending it,
I will begin thinking of our relationship like this:
“You are a sinner, but I graciously choose to love you anyway.”

If that sounds a bit puffed up to you,
a little condescending and self-righteous,
then you have perceived correctly.

Jesus understood the human tendency to judge others and focus on their sin—
and this is why, in the gospels, he taught that we should avoid it.

We should focus simply on loving our neighbors,
including our neighbors who are enemies.

In Luke 18, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

The Pharisees were religious leaders who believed they needed to separate themselves from sinners in order to remain pure and holy before God. (In Hebrew, the word “Pharisee” literally means “set apart” or “separated ones.”)

By contrast, tax collectors were commonly considered the worst of sinners, since they collaborated with the Roman occupation force, making them traitors to their own people.

Note the contrast between the two figures in the parable:

The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, “God, I thank you that I’m 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.”

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’

I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.” (Common English Bible)

As Adam Hamilton writes, when “love the sinner” is our mantra, we put ourselves in the position of seeing others as sinners rather than neighbors.

Though we may emphasize that we also are sinners
(some of the Pharisees missed that part)—

our focus on the other as sinner rather than as neighbor defines our relationship thusly:

“I will love you despite the fact that you are a sinner.”

Luke introduced this parable with these words:

“Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteousness and who looked on everyone else with disgust.”
(v. 9)

Have you ever met people like that?

Were they pleasant to be around?

More importantly, are you ever like that?

VI

Jesus knew that his disciples would struggle with the tendency to judge others.

That is why in the Sermon on the Mount he says to his disciples both then and now:

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Jesus wanted his followers to avoid such judgmentalism.

After all, Jesus' nonjudgmental approach was part of what drew people to him, just as the judgmental approach of some Pharisees repelled many sinners.

As he did so often, Jesus uses a graphically memorable metaphor:
the splinter in your brother's or sister's eye,
compared with the log in your own eye.

No doubt Jesus' listeners immediately grasped the point of what he was describing.

Perhaps they even laughed at the absurdity of it all.

The point, though, was a serious one:
judging others is not something disciples of Jesus should do.

If Jesus wouldn't say "Love the sinner," what would he say instead?

I think it would be something like,

"Love your neighbor despite the fact that you are a sinner."

In other words:

As a follower of Jesus I will love you because you are a person who needs love.

And though I am a sinner, you deserve my love because God first loved us.

I will love you because Jesus said love is the way his disciples are meant to live.

I will love you because that love has the power to change the world.

VII

So it must be clear by now that “Love the sinner” presents significant difficulties.

But it is the last part of this half-truth—

“Hate the sin”—

where the real problems arise.

Over and over we read in the gospels how Jesus hung out with...

drunkards,

prostitutes,

thieves,

the occasional adulterer,

traitors to his own people—

in short, sinners of every sort.

He routinely spent time with those who undoubtedly had impure thoughts,

cheated on their taxes,

and committed a variety of crimes.

He broke bread with them,

healed them,

and even called them to be his disciples.

Yet never once did Jesus say to any of them,

I love you but I hate your sin.

In fact, the only time Jesus ever seems to demonstrate a hatred of sin occurs when the sin is committed by religious leaders.

For example, Jesus got so angry at the sight of merchants in the Temple ripping off the poor—

charging exorbitant rates to exchange money for the Temple offerings and to buy animals for sacrifices to God—

that he overturned the money changers' tables and drove them out of the Temple

He was especially disdainful toward religious leaders' hypocrisy, declaring in Matthew 23 what are commonly called the "seven woes."

Here is one of them:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (23:27-28)

When people are asked why they don't attend church, one of the main reasons given is the hypocrisy of religious leaders.

I think most people realize we are all hypocrites to a certain extent, and no one lives out perfectly what they believe.

But what turns people off is when religious people point out the sins of others but act as though they have no sins of their own.

Here's a cartoon that illustrates the point:

A person who has just died stands in front of St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, hoping to be admitted to heaven. As St. Peter finds the appropriate page in the Book of Life, he says, "You were a believer, yes, but you skipped the 'not being a jerk about it' part."

My fervent desire is to be a Christian without being a jerk about it,
and I hope through my ministry to help each of you be the same.

VIII

Billy Graham's daughter Gigi gave an interview where she talked about the time she was her father's date to *Time* magazine's seventy-fifth anniversary banquet in Washington, DC.

President Bill Clinton had just been impeached by the House of Representatives for perjury and obstruction of justice for what he had said, under oath, about his relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

At the banquet, Gigi's father sat with President and Mrs. Clinton,
and he was warm and gracious to each of them.

After the dinner, as Rev. Graham and Gigi were riding back to their hotel, the two discussed the difficulties the president and First Lady were going through with so many people gossiping, speculating about their personal lives, and judging them.

Gigi said her father's simple comment was,

*It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict;
it's God's job to judge;
and it's our job to love.*

It can't be said any better than that: **Our job is to love.**

For there will always be sin in the world.

When that sin is inflicted upon others,
when it brings harm to the weak and the vulnerable,
we must speak and act.

We are to be painfully aware of our own sin and regularly invite God to transform us, heal us, and forgive us.

We are also to recognize that we will never see clearly how God sees,
nor understand fully how God understands.

What we can see clearly,
and what is unmistakable regarding God's will,
is that we love one another, as Christ has loved us.

The full truth of "Love the sinner, hate the sin" stops with the very first word:
Love.

Let's love one another while striving to lay aside our own sin,
as we demonstrate humility and grace towards everyone,
especially those who think, believe, and live differently than we do.

The world needs more Christians who are not jerks.

Being a jerk misses the mark and strays from the path.

The song we all learned to sing in the 1960s still says it best:

*And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

Amen.

Sources:

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