

Feb 4 –

Sermon: Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5

Today we end our series of sermons on half-truths. This one, “Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin” is probably the most used/overused of the half-truths. Many Christians use it with the best of intentions. When they say it, they mean to be gracious and kind. It reflects their love of people. The speaker usually means that they are not being judgmental when they point out sin, as in “I am a sinner too.” To support the idea of loving the sinner and hating the sin, some people point to Romans 12:9 where Paul writes, “Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.” But notice that Paul is not telling his readers to hate the sin in someone else’s life; he is telling them to hate the evil they might be tempted to pursue in their own lives. Don’t pretend to show love, then judge in the very next breath. Instead, “Let love be genuine.”

We need to realize that Jesus never said these words, nor does the sentiment behind it reflect the kinds of things he said or the way he lived. The phrase seems to have originated with St. Augustine, a bishop from North Africa who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. He was writing to a group of nuns asking them to remain chaste. In the letter he called them to have a “love for mankind and hatred of sins.”

Before we get into the phrase and why it is a half-truth, we need to talk about that word sin, for just a moment. We all sin, none of us live a perfect life. If we all sin, then is it true, as some Christians say, that all sins are equal? If we study the Bible and apply common sense, the answer is clear: No not all sins are equal. Eating too much and being overweight is an act of gluttony and gluttony is a sin, but is that the same, in God’s eyes or humanities, as driving under the influence and killing another? Clearly, they are very different. We can think of all sorts of examples that show that God sees some sins very differently than others. Roman Catholics have two specific terms to describe the varying seriousness and severity of sins. Venial sins are those that are less serious and more readily forgiven. Mortal sins are grave violations of God’s will. These are committed knowingly and willingly. The Catholic Church has

a List of the Seven Deadly sins from which, they believe, all other sins emerge. Even then they rank the sins believing “Pride” is the worst because all other sins come from it.

Now let us look at this half-truth. The first part of this statement is true. Of course we are called to love the sinner! The problem—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, and it can actually lead us to sin by violating something Jesus did teach his disciples they should do. Jesus certainly loved sinners. One of the charges the Pharisees made against him was that he spent his time with tax collectors and prostitutes. And yet, Jesus never actually said, “Love the sinner.” What he did say was “love your neighbor.” Jesus’ teaching makes clear that your neighbor is everyone you meet. He even goes further in explaining who our neighbors are. He expressly commands us to love our enemies—people who have wronged us. We are to love our enemies especially, because Jesus teaches that when we do, the world changes.

So why doesn’t Jesus ever say, “Love the sinner?” First, such a command would be redundant, since our neighbor and enemy are both sinners. More importantly, if he said, “love the sinner” his disciples would 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 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 little puffed up, self-righteous and even prideful to you, then you have perceived accurately.

When we “love the sinner” our focus on the other as sinner rather than as neighbor defines our relationship: “I love you despite the fact that you are a sinner.” I think Jesus would say, “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. You are my neighbor and you might even be my enemy but you are also a child of God and so I am commanded to love you. And I have to admit that I am a sinner and this makes it really hard for me to do this all the time. In spite of how hard this can be, I will love you because Jesus said this is the way his disciples are meant to live.

Think about how that changes everything. When we understand that our call is to love all and, instead of focusing on their sin, we focus on how hard it is for us to love, our sin, it changes the dynamic. When we focus on other's sin we always focus on whatever we hate, don't understand or are uncomfortable about. We are trying to be magnanimous but our sanctimony and hypocrisy come through. When we focus on our sin and as Paul says, "hate that which keeps us from loving" we see others in a totally new way.

The other part of the phrase: "Hate the sin" is where the real problem arises. As the Gospels make a point of showing us, Jesus spent time with people labeled as sinners. Yet we never hear Jesus say to them, "I love you, but I hate your sin." When Jesus talks to sinful people he doesn't talk about their sin but about God's forgiveness. The only time Jesus seems to demonstrate a hatred of sin occurs when the sin is committed by religious leaders. I think what turns people off of religion is when religious people point out the sins of others but act as though they have no sins of their own or their sin is minor in comparison.

And, as I said, we often focus on another's sin that makes us uncomfortable or is something we are struggling with ourselves. We have seen religious leaders denouncing infidelity in marriage caught in extra-marital affairs, for an example. My buddy Tom was a hard drinking, swearing truck driver who ran a moving company. Yet he was also a gifted musician and led the music program in his church for years. Tom would get so angry when people did not come to choir or bell practice. He would yell about their lack of commitment. He would say, "I just hate that they are this way!" He wanted me, as their pastor, to let them know their sin of sloth was hurting everyone. Yet, he never wanted me to remind him about his language! Hating another's sin makes it almost impossible for us to be loving to them as well.

Somebody gave me a cartoon depicting St. Peter standing at the pearly gates. A person who has just died stands in front of St. Peter, hoping for admission into heaven. As 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 hope is to be a Christian without being a jerk. I hope to help you be Christians without being jerks.

Should we keep silent about the problem of sin? Of course not. Many things in the world we should stand up against, like child abuse, or the mistreatment of women, or racial attitudes

that demean one whole class of people. We would be morally bankrupt as a faith if we did not stand against these sins. There are many other things in the world that Christians are of differing opinions, like gun control, the role of women, and immigration to mention a few. Too often we focus on how we feel the other person or group is wrong instead of seeking to build bridges of understanding. And yes it is hard to love your enemies! Even if we, in faith, feel a need to stand against something, and this is how social change happens, we have to understand that there is no consensus. It might create anger and mistrust amongst fellow believers but God always seeks a few to be prophets. We can be forceful and faithful and loving without being a jerk!

Recently this phrase has been used mostly against people in the GLBT community as a justification for the church treating them the way it often does. I am not going into this any farther than to say that this is the current named "sin." It has been used in the past against divorced people, mixed race marriages, and mixed religious marriages, and a whole lot more.

Jesus focused on love not on hate. He realized that love is transformational while hate creates walls that separate us. No one is going to want to be around another who hates anything about them, even if you try to wrap it in love. This is why Jesus talks about loving your neighbor and enemy. He talks about God's forgiveness. We are in the business to love, to extend grace, and let the love of God transform our lives and the lives of others. What will that transformation look like? We don't know. That is why we fear it, because we don't control it. We have to trust our God. So what you see in me as a sin might not be what God has put on my heart to be working on and what I see as sin in you may not be an issue for you. But instead of focusing on those sins I am going to focus on love. That is hard enough to do! It will take all my efforts to stamp out the sin in my life to accomplish this. And sometimes, together, we will even stand together against sins that all agree are wrong, challenging people to live by a more excellent way.