

Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin
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Matthew 7:1-5

7 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Our opening hymn this morning is one that my almost three year old Zechariah loves to sing. In fact, he is so theological minded, he actually adds to the lyrics. In the first verse he sings, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so," then quickly adds, "Jesus loves you this I know, for my Bible tells me so." It's absolutely adorable, I love it when he sings, and it's theologically accurate. Jesus loves me and Jesus loves you, Jesus loves all of us, for the Bible tells me so. If we read the Bible any other way, then I would question whether we're reading it correctly. I remember a teacher once saying, "If it doesn't sound like love, then it's not of God. If it sounds like love, then it's of God." Scripture tells us God is love, so love one another.

This is our final Sunday looking at half-truths, phrases that aren't really in the Bible, while next week Steve will make an attempt at sharing what Jesus really said. At first glance the phrase we are looking at today likely appears fine. I'm sure many of us have used this as a way to say, of course we love, but we hate the sin of other people. We might even think this is found in the Bible, but again, as it's been in previous weeks, "Love the sinner, hate the sin" is not found in the Bible. It seems to have come from Saint Augustine, who was a bishop in North Africa in the late fourth and fifth centuries. In a letter that the good bishop wrote, he called the recipients of this letter to have "love for mankind and hatred of sins." I'm guessing that Augustine never meant the phrase to be used in the way we use it today.

Some might point toward Romans 12: 9, where Paul writes, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good," as a way to say that this half-truth is in the Bible, but "Paul is not telling his readers to hate the sin in someone else's life; he's telling them to hate the evil they might be tempted to pursue in their own lives," (Hamilton, Pg. 158). He also tells them to let love be genuine. We're not to pretend that we love, then in the very next moment judge that person's actions. At first glance, this sounds like a gracious saying. "The person speaking desires for it to come across this way: "I want you to know how much I love you, and because of that I'm concerned about something you are doing." The person receiving the statement hears it this way: "I'm a compassionate guy, but let me make it perfectly clear that I don't accept or approve your behavior." It is difficult for you to feel loved when I'm telling you how much I hate your sin," (Bill Couch, Lake Ridge UMC).

I have heard this phrase used in church before, many times actually, in a way to say that we welcome everyone into church because, and you can probably see it coming; we “love the sinner and hate the sin.” I have heard people say it as almost a mission statement or something. Now what if we made it even more personal? When you walk into church you heard, “I love you, but I hate your sin of gossip. I love you, but I hate your sin of materialism. I love you, but I hate your sin of not caring for the poor. I love you, but I hate your sin of not fitting.” I may have gone too far with that last one! But my guess is that if this was the message you heard from Christians, it would be hard if not impossible for you to feel loved. It’s impossible to feel loved when I’m pointing out your sin. Instead, you would likely feel judged and condemned.

The first part of this statement is true, we are invited to love sinners, but if we look closer at the Gospels, what did Jesus say? He didn’t say “Love the sinner,” instead he said, “Love your neighbor.” When you go around looking at everyone as sinners, we don’t look at them as neighbors and this is an important distinction. To love others as neighbors means that we look out for one another, we do good, we bless, we encourage others. As Pastor Adam Hamilton wrote, “When ‘Love the sinner’ is our mantra, we’ve 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.”

I recently finished a book by Brother David Steindel-Rast, who is an Austrian monk that has become a TED Talk sensation with his talk on gratefulness. His talk has been viewed nearly 7 million times. He also wrote a book on that topic *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*. I actually picked up this book in preparation for All Saints Sunday coming up in November, but Br. David surprised me with a closing chapter titled “Love: A ‘Yes’ to Belonging.” In it he writes, “Love opens our eyes. We suddenly see the bliss of belonging. And, deep down, that sense of belonging is all-embracing. Love is not a feeling, but a freely chosen attitude. No one can command us to feel one way or another. Love, therefore, is a sudden experience of belonging.” He continues by writing that the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. Indifference is a clear-cut “no” to belonging. That indifference that he writes about could be defined as tolerance.

Maybe that’s another way to view this phrase. In reality, it’s not about love, it’s about tolerance. Too often we act like tolerance is a good thing, maybe even a Christian virtue, but who really wants to be tolerated? We “tolerate” a distracting noise when we’re trying to concentrate. We “tolerate” a slow computer when we have to. We “tolerate” pain when we are sick or injured. We don’t “tolerate” people. According to Jesus, people aren’t meant to be tolerated, they are meant to be loved, as neighbors. They are meant to belong; to you, and me, and the church.

Today’s phrase, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” is a “half-truth” because when we use it, we like to believe that it gives us a license to walk about looking for specks in the eyes of others, which means that we think we’re allowed to count the sins of others. Yet, when we do this we become burdened and blinded by the logs in our own eyes that we can’t see others for who they really are, children of God, and even more personal, neighbors. When we use this phrase, we then feel like we can walk around identifying people first by sin, or our own arbitrary measurement of sinfulness, so that we, from our own comfort zones or dare I say our own self-righteousness, look down on others or we might so graciously tolerate them in spite of their sinfulness.

The other side of this is that we should take sin seriously; so much so, I have heard it said that we should speak the truth in love to sinners. Alright, that one is actually in the Bible. It's from Ephesians Chapter 4, Verse 15. Paul did write that we are to speak the truth in love, but listen to that entire verse, "Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." It's not referring to speaking the truth of other people's sins; it's about each of us speaking of God's truth in love, as Paul continues in that chapter, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." It's about our own spiritual growth. "Speaking the truth in love" is about being truthful and honest about ourselves. It is about being compassionate, loving and building others up—not judging others or removing the speck from their eye. Isn't that what Jesus was referring to in Matthew?

Jesus, as recorded in Matthew, preaches to the crowd gathered to hear him in what's known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus spoke not only to the crowd, but to his disciples reminding them and all disciples that we are to be concerned about our own sin, not toward judging the sins of others. "Jesus knew that the disciples themselves would struggle with the tendency to judge others. It was this judgmentalism that Jesus wanted his disciples then and now to avoid. 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 used a graphic, memorable metaphor: the splinter in your brother's or sister's eye, compared with the log in your own eye. Jesus' listeners could immediately grasp the absurdity of what he was describing," but the truth of how judging others' sins is sinful. (Hamilton Pg. 154). Pointing out people's sins, judging others, doesn't draw people to Christ and the community of faith, but do you know what does? Love and a love that is an invitation to belonging.

It is true that we should take sin seriously, but it should be our own sin; sin that literally means where we "stray from the path" or "miss the mark", where the path or the mark being God's intention or will for us. Our spiritual journey should not be about the sins of others, but my own sin, where I miss the mark, and together we learn what it means to repent, turn from our sins and follow Jesus, but when we focus on the sin of others, we ourselves fall into a pattern of judging and what I would call sin. To be honest, I think that's why a lot of young people lose interest in the church. They love Jesus and his ideals and who he is; they just struggle with the church, when what they see is more toleration than love. Young people notice when the church says we love you and you belong, but only to a degree. As I have noticed with kids, they see everything we do and they will mimic our actions. They will see how we welcome, how we love and how we allow others to belong or not.

What would the church be like if we spoke that truth in love more than anything else, where we offered love as a yes to belonging; where we chose to love beyond any judgment and mere toleration of the other, but offered complete belonging to everyone? My friend from St. Luke's, Pastor Rob, said a few weeks ago in a sermon, "As we stay close to God, it doesn't make us more critical and judgmental – it should make us more loving and accepting." When we say that we "love the sinner and hate the sin," we miss the mark. We need to see others as neighbors and not sinners. Jesus called us not to love sinners, but to love our neighbors. I really

think that there is one word of truth in that phrase. Let's replace this half-truth with the whole truth and it's found in one word: Love. Love your God. Love yourself. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love everyone until we can sing boldly, just like my three old, "Jesus loves me and Jesus loves you this I know, for my Bible tells me so."

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus, how grateful we are that you came not to show judgment to sinners, but to offer forgiveness and love; not to point out all our sins, but to show the way, the truth, and the life. How grateful we are that you continue to save us from our sins, that you forgive us and show us mercy, and you have called us who have received mercy to give mercy. Help us to be the kind of followers who welcome people and love them. Help us to live that life of love not just in church but in our lives every day. Amen.