

“THE BIBLE DOESN’T SAY THAT: II – ‘LOVE THE SINNER, HATE THE SIN’”

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Matthew 7: 1-5

Today I present the second sermon in my sermon series entitled “The Bible Doesn’t Say That,” but before I do, I want to tell you something of what happened after I preached last Sunday’s sermon. You might recall that last week’s sermon dealt with the saying “God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle,” and in it, I talked about the fact that not only is that statement not Biblical, it’s also incorrect – that God doesn’t give you troubles in life that you have to handle, rather when troubles come, God is right there with you to handle it all.

Well, after the services ended last week, I was astounded by the number of people who came to me or wrote to me telling me about times they had been going through a struggle and numerous people said that to them, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” and how frustrating it was for them. Across the board, they thanked me for addressing it.

I tell you that because it helps to consider the three phrases I am dealing with in these three sermons from the perspective of the ones hearing them. I think when we do, we’ll realize how they are not Biblical, and in most cases, not very kind or caring.

Such is certainly the case with the phrase I’ll consider with you this morning, and it is this: “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” At face value, you may not think it sounds too bad, in fact, it might even sound loving to you. “I hate the sin, but in spite of that, I love the sinner.” It sounds magnanimous, doesn’t it? “I don’t like what you’re doing, but I still love you.”

Trouble is – well, there’s a lot troubling about it – so let’s start with its origin. Contrary to what some believe, it doesn’t come from the Bible. Most probably, it started with something Saint Augustine said long, long ago – in the fourth century – which has been taken out of context. What Augustine said, in a letter to nuns, asking them to remain chaste was this: “with love for mankind and hatred of sins.” Somehow, over the centuries it has morphed, as one preacher put it, “from Augustine calling himself out and hating his own sins into something we use to point fingers at others.” (On-line, The Rev. Gary Haller, “Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin, 4/2/17, Birmingham First UMC, Michigan)

Now, whether or not you agree with his statement, that we use it to point fingers at others, put yourself in the place of the person about whom it's being said. What they are hearing is that you're calling them a sinner, you're labeling them a sinner. But, bless your heart, you still love them?

Do you hear how that sounds? And that's the first big trouble with this statement. That saying "love the sinner" identifies them not for who they are, a beloved child of God, but for the sins you perceive them committing. And that, friends, is something Jesus never did.

Oh yes, Jesus was concerned about sin, and yes, he called people to turn away from sin, but – here's the thing – nowhere in holy scripture do we read that he called a person "sinner." He didn't label them, instead he loved them.

Now, lest you think I'm making too fine a point of this, let me remind you that one of the greatest criticisms of people of faith is that we are judgmental of others, that we label people. True or not, that is the perception of many. And well, when we say "love the sinner," we are labeling them.

Actually, Gandhi once made a rather shocking statement, which was, "I like your Christ, but not your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

It's very sad to hear that, and I hope it's not true, but too many people have heard "Love the sinner, hate the sin," and all they hear is that they're being seen, first and foremost, as a sinner, not as a person, not as a husband or wife, daughter or son, student or worker, but first and foremost, seen as a sinner.

Let me put it in a little different fashion, in a way that might make it easier to understand, as one man put it: "Let's say it's Valentine's Day. If you want to mess up your day, say, 'Honey, I love you, but . . .' and fill in the blank. Why doesn't that work? Because once we say 'but,' all the attention moves away from 'I love you' and on to whatever is the problem being mentioned." (On-line, "Half-Truths, Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin," St. Andrews UMC, Findlay, OH, 2/11/18)

Saying that line, calling a person a sinner is that "but" – I love you "but" – and that's all they hear.

We would do well, instead of saying "Love the sinner, hate the sin" to do what Jesus did, and what he calls us to do – and that is simply love, with no labels. Simply love. Love, knowing that everyone has things with which he or she struggles, and everyone does sin. Love them, Jesus says, don't judge them. That's God's job.

Friends, that's a tall order in the world in which we live, because I'm pretty sure you realize that we're living right now in a name-calling culture. It's downright embarrassing to try to explain to our children that they shouldn't call

people names when people in leadership and a whole lot of others call people names every day. How tempting then it is, in a world such as this today, to call out people as sinners.

But that leads me to the second big troubling thing about this statement, and that is our focusing on the sins of others. When we say “love the sinner, hate the sin,” we’re speaking about others, we’re pointing out their sin.

And clearly that is not what Jesus would have us do. All we have to do is look at today’s Gospel lesson to remember that. Jesus tells us not to worry about the speck in someone else’s eye, rather take a look at the log in our own eye. Ours is not to point out the sins of others, ours is to look into our own lives and how we sin.

It’s a theme Jesus repeats again and again. He talks about it in the passage where Mary anoints his feet – he admonishes Judas and the others for judging her. He talks about it in the passage where the Pharisee and the tax collector are praying in the temple, and the Pharisee compares himself to the tax collector, extolling his own virtues, and trying to prove how he was more worthy than the other man. Jesus hated that kind of behavior, and hates it still.

One writer said it so beautifully: “One of the reasons people were so attracted to Jesus was his non-judgmental approach. It was so refreshing. There were enough people in his culture who were glad to judge others. Pharisees did. Sadducees did. Romans did. Everyone found their own little cubbyhole of self-righteousness, giving them the comfort of feeling better than some other wretched sinner.” (Haller, *ibid.*)

Jesus did otherwise, and he calls us to do likewise. Don’t worry about anyone else’s sin, leave it to him. Worry about your own.

The thing is, and we all know it, that it’s easier to look at someone else’s sin and name it, than to really look at ourselves and honestly admit our own sins. It’s so tempting to point out the sins of others and hide our heads in the sand about our own. I read an interesting idea from one pastor this week. He talked about growing up in New Mexico and how you had to be careful when outside walking along because there were rattlesnakes in the area.

He said: “What do you do when you come across a rattlesnake in the middle of the path? If you have any sense, you freeze. You freeze solid and then ever-so-slowly you back away. That’s how I see judgmentalism (he writes). It’s born out of a pridefulness that is poisonous. And it will surely kill you. When you see it in yourself, back away. For with the measure you judge, so will you be judged. The evil you do comes back to you. That’s what Jesus warned us. Frankly, I just don’t have the heart to judge anymore (he finishes). I find myself searching myself

because ‘pride and judgment’ sneak up and poison the best of us and we’re hardly aware of it – because we’ve got that big ol’ log in our eye.” (Haller, *ibid.*)

So I want to tell you a couple of stories to help you think about saying this line, or not saying this line in the future. They are stories from two great men of faith.

The first is Billy Graham. In Adam Hamilton’s book *Half Truths*, upon which this sermon series is loosely based, he tells about Billy Graham and his daughter Gigi going to a banquet in Washington DC one night honoring Time magazine’s 75th anniversary. President Bill Clinton was the keynote speaker, and he had just been impeached by the House of Representatives.

At the banquet, the Grahams sat with the Clintons, and Billy Graham was warm and gracious to them. After the dinner was over, and the Grahams were on the ride back to their hotel, Gigi Graham turned to her father and told him how surprised she was that he could be so gracious to them. Do you know what her father said back to her? “Gigi, it’s the Holy Spirit’s job to convict; it’s God’s job to judge; and it’s our job to love.” (Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths*, p. 159)

It’s our job to love.

The second story involves the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “In a sermon titled “Love Your Enemies,” he said, ‘Sometime ago my brother and I were driving one evening to Chattanooga, Tennessee from Atlanta. He was driving the car. And for some reason, the drivers were very discourteous that night. They didn’t dim their lights; hardly any driver that passed by dimmed his lights. And I remember very vividly (King said), my brother A.D. looked over and in a tone of anger said, ‘I know what I’m going to do. The next car that comes along here and refuses to dim the lights, I’m going to fail to dim mine and pour them on in all of their power.’ And I looked at him right quick and said, ‘Oh, no, don’t do that. There’ll be too much light on this highway, and it will end up in mutual destruction for all. Somebody got to have some sense on this highway.’” (On-line, “Christian Cliches: Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin,” Rev. Kory Wilcoxson)

Oh friends, Dr. King was on to something. When we go at each other, we end up in mutual destruction. When we judge each other, or label each other, it goes nowhere good.

“Love each other,” Jesus said, “as brother and sister, as beloved children of God. Don’t call each other names, or give each other labels. Worry about yourself, look at your own life and how you sin, how you miss the mark, and leave the judging to me.”

So let me close today with some inspiring words from Mark Havel:

“Our challenge as followers of Jesus, is to walk around in the world still wet with the water of our baptism: water that identifies us, first, as children of God; water that invites us into a new way of life; water in which we are forgiven in all the ways we need God’s grace; and water that washes the logs from our eyes and the sins from our souls, **so that we might see others as though we are looking into a mirror – not through a magnifying glass**; so that we will see others as God sees us all: speckled and sinful; broken and in need; lost but loved, anyway, by the same God who created us all . . . loves us still . . . and that calls us to love others – and to mean it – in return.” (On-line, Mark Havel, “Half-Truths: Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin,” Cross of Grace 4/2/17)

What a wonderful way to put it – **“that we might see others as though we are looking into a mirror, not through a magnifying glass.”** Oh friends, may that image remain always in our minds so that we might never again be tempted to say “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” May it be so.

Amen.