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“Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin (The Bible Doesn’t Say That)”

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Romans 3:21-24 (CEB)

Matthew 7:1-5 (CEB)

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Several of you have confessed to me that, while this sermon series has been instructive, it has also made you uncomfortable. Some of the “almost biblical” sayings are so common that even well-intentioned people like us find ourselves repeating them. Sometimes it’s a good thing to be made uncomfortable because that’s often a sign of growth. But if debunking the biblical authenticity of “Everything happens for a reason” and “God never gives you more than you can handle” have been a little *unsettling*, today’s topic may be downright *upsetting*: “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” The Bible doesn’t say that.

There are two parts to this saying, and neither of them is biblical. I’ll address each part separately, then dig more deeply into the context in which these words are often spoken.

Love the sinner. That sounds like a good thing, like something we should do. Jesus was called a friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19). And we’re supposed to be loving toward everyone, right? Yes, but the Bible doesn’t say that. In fact, if we’re proof-texting, we could just as easily find an injunction to *hate* the sinner (see Psalm 5:5).

Jesus didn’t tell us to love the sinner, but he *did* tell us to love our *neighbor*, repeating a commandment found in Leviticus 19:18. Then he went on to expand our understanding of who our neighbor is by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. *Spoiler alert: it’s everybody.* If we’re to show love to everyone, doesn’t that include sinners? Why yes, yes it does. So, what’s the problem with saying “love the sinner?” While it may be *technically* correct, the focus is off. It creates a separation where one should not be. “Love the sinner” implies a distinction between the one giving the love and the one receiving it, that one is a sinner and the other is, well...not. In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells us that *all* have sinned and fall short of God’s glory. *News flash: that includes you. And me.*

“Love the sinner” focuses on the sin and not our shared humanity. And it elevates us to a status the Bible does not confer upon us. We are not above those we are supposed to love. The problem with identifying ourselves as righteous is that it can make us *self-righteous*. When I categorize someone as a sinner, I am setting myself up as somehow better or less sinful than them, and that is dangerously close to heresy. Jesus told a story in the Gospel of Luke in which two people go to the temple to pray: one a religious leader, the other a tax collector. (In New Testament times, that job is equated with extortion and complicity with the Romans.) The religious leader offers a loud and eloquent prayer, thanking God for his religiosity and that he’s not like other people who are miserable sinners. He even singles out the tax collector in his prayer. The tax collector, on the other hand, bows his head in humility and prays only, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I don’t have to tell you which prayer Jesus found more faithful. He concluded the story with this advice: those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be lifted up. Better to stick to love and leave the judgment to God.

Hate the sin. Jesus never said to hate the sin. He didn’t even say *he* hated the sin other people committed, this despite spending a considerable amount of his time in ministry hanging out with people society considered undesirable sinners – people like prostitutes and tax collectors and those who profited off other people’s misery. He did spend a lot of time offering forgiveness and telling people to “go and sin no more.” And he saved his harshest criticism for religious types who went around casting judgment and showing off how righteous they were while neglecting the love and mercy they were *supposed* to be practicing.

That doesn’t mean we should be indifferent to sin. Sin leads us away from God and toward things that do not lead to health and wholeness. Left unchecked, sin destroys lives. Later in his letter to the Roman church, Paul writes, “Hate evil and hold on to what is good.” But what Paul was instructing the good people of First Church Rome to do was not to hate someone *else’s* sin, but the evil that drew *them* toward sin in their own lives. As followers of Jesus, we are to renounce wickedness, repent of sin, and resist evil in whatever form it presents itself. It’s right there in our baptismal covenant. And we should strive to eradicate sin from our lives – both individual and collective sin. That includes actions

we take or words we say that directly injure or harm others, and also our silent complicity in policies and systems that keep people trapped in poverty or hunger or violence or despair or that alienate them from God.

Like “Love the sinner,” *Hate the sin* creates a separation where the Bible doesn’t place one. It puts us in a position of arbiter over others. But that’s not our job. We are instead called to have the mind of Christ, characterized by humility and faithfulness.

As near as I can ascertain, “Love the sinner, hate the sin” has its origins *not* in scripture, but in a letter written by Augustine in the early fifth century to a group of nuns in the Roman city of Hippo (modern day Algeria). Augustine was concerned about the nuns’ interaction with men and their ability to remain celibate. Within his guidance about rules, he instructed that regulations were to be enforced “with love for the persons and a hatred for their vices,”¹ to keep them in good standing and to remain part of the community.

Thus far, I’ve been talking about “Love the sinner, hate the sin” in terms of what the Bible says and doesn’t say about it, treating it as I would any other saying. But it’s important for us to acknowledge that this saying isn’t simply repeated as a principle applied to sin in general but is applied almost exclusively to attitudes about same-sex relationships. “Love the sinner, hate the sin” somehow makes people feel justified in condemning the LGBTQ community without feeling like they’re being hateful. If we love the sinner, we can hate the “sin,” right? Making a distinction between the person and the practice can seem like a way to be both loving and tough on sin at the same time. But it’s not biblical, and it might even be flat-out wrong.

I’ve shared in sermons and in conversations many times before how my own mind has changed on this matter. I’ve come to the conclusion that the Bible does *not* condemn same-sex relationships as an entire category. I have arrived at that position over the course of 30 years of study and prayer and reflection and discussion. I believe that the church historically has been wrong in the way we have interpreted scripture and the way we have treated the LGBTQ community. At the very least, there is enough ambiguity in the six passages that say something about same-sex *something* that we cannot speak with anything like certainty about what God thinks of same-sex relationships. And I believe it is wrong to draw a dark line where neither scripture nor Christ drew one. I also know that there are many prayerful and loving people who don’t share my position on that and may never share it. That doesn’t make them hateful or bigoted. They’re striving to do the best they can with their theological perspective to faithfully interpret God’s intent, which is all any of us can do. And I want to reinforce my oft-stated conviction that this is a conversation worth staying in, even when our disagreements are profound. That’s personal for me because there have been people in my life who loved me enough to stay in relationship with me when I was convinced of my rightness, and not always with love or humility. And I am so grateful to God for their love and patience.

Interpreting scripture can be challenging, and we must wrestle with it – all of it – as people of “the book.” There *are* only six passages in all of scripture that address same-sex relationships, but those six passages are *in* the text, and we must determine how to approach them faithfully and prayerfully. We can turn to original languages to see what those words mean and try to understand what they meant then. We can study the social settings to try to understand the cultural milieu in which they were written. We can lean on scholarly research to help us discover linguistic and contextual elements not obvious from a simple, straightforward reading of a modern English translation. But we cannot be entirely certain about what those particular verses were intended to mean *then* or *now*. There are many other matters on which the Bible is more clear and more emphatic that we don’t consider binding today; most notably, the legitimacy of slavery and the second-class status of women. We must always approach the task of scriptural interpretation with humility and discernment, and no small amount of fear and trembling, as well. We must take care not to take the words of scripture too lightly, but we must also exercise caution not to overstate the Bible’s meaning, particularly when it comes to what or who is inside and outside God’s grace. How we interpret God’s judgment around human identity can – and does – have life and death consequences, both now and in the life to come. I’m not being melodramatic when I say that lives and souls are at stake. We are unfaithful to God’s ongoing revelation when we treat the biblical canon as the last thing God intended to say to us. To use particular interpretations of particular verses to

¹ Augustine of Hippo. Letter 211. *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Part II, Volume 4. New York: New City Press (2005), 25.

justify dismissing what God has revealed to us through science and personal testimony is, in the words of scholar Amy-Jill Levine, “both harmful and theologically aberrant.”²

Love the sinner, hate the sin” lets us off the hook too easily. Not only does it put the focus on others and away from our own responsibility, but it offers justification for marginalization of and harm toward those whose identities are more than what some regard as moral choices. And when it comes to deciding who is inside and outside God’s grace, Jesus was crystal clear: *Don’t judge or it will come back on you. How can you focus on the splinter in your neighbor’s eye when you have a log in your own? First get the log out of your own eye so you can begin to see clearly.* (Matthew 7:1-5, my paraphrase) Judging is not our job. We’re simply not qualified, though desire to be in control sometimes leads us to think we are.

Jesus never told us to love the sinner and hate the sin. But he did say, “This is my commandment: that you love one another” (John 15:12). Let’s stick to love and leave the judgment to God.

² Amy-Jill Levine. “How to Read the Bible’s ‘clobber passages’ on Homosexuality.” Outreach (online) https://outreach.faith/2022/09/amy-jill-levine-how-to-read-the-bibles-clobber-passages-on-homosexuality/?fbclid=IwAR1Tlb4q9IEIVxvthjp1kQatmc_sOjdtSkDg-IGYyx1tgl4CtcDYyFo2svk. September 21, 2022.