

Half-Truth ó ðLove the Sinner Hate the Sinö
 Psalm Lesson Psalm 51:1-12, Matthew 7:1-5, Luke 18:10-14
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This morning we conclude our winter sermon series on trading half-truths for the whole truth by looking at the phrase, ðLove the sinner, hate the sin.ö We hear this phrase pretty often, mostly from fellow Christians with good intentions ó folks who say it to intend to be gracious and kind.ⁱ As with the other statements we have dealt with in this series, many Christians believe that this statement is found in Scripture, and even that Jesus said it, but neither is true. In fact, the statement does not really reflect the kinds of things Jesus said.

Instead, this phrase seems to have originated with St. Augustine in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. Augustine was writing to a group of nuns, asking them to remain chaste. In the letter, he called for them to have a ðlove for mankind and hatred of sins.ö However, it is doubtful that Augustine meant to coin a phrase that we would use 1500 years later to describe our dislike of someone else's sins.ⁱⁱ

Mahatma Gandhi wrote something similar in his 1929 autobiography; but with an important addition that we usually don't see. What we usually see is, ðHate the sin and not the sinner,ö but the full statement reads, ðHate 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.ö Gandhi was not advocating the idea of this half-truth, rather as Adam Hamilton notes, he was observing that most find it hard to hate another's sin without harming the sinner.ⁱⁱⁱ

As we dig into this topic this morning, let's all get on the same page about what we mean when we talk about sin ó and we don't like to talk about it much at all do we? In both the Old and New Testaments, sin essentially means to miss the mark or to fall short of God's will or

where God wants us to be. It can refer to thoughts, words, and actions that we do that are contrary to God's will as well as those things we fail to do that we should do — sins of commission and sins of omission if you will. Of course, as Romans 3:23 reminds us, we all sin and fall short of God's glory. All of us like the Apostle Paul struggle to do the things we should and avoid the things we shouldn't do. We all miss the mark and fall short.

With this definition in mind, let's start with "love the sinner." This of course is true, we are called to love sinners. Jesus modeled this for us in the gospels where he was called a friend of sinners. Time after time we see him eating with, calling, healing and fellowshiping with sinners.

The problem, Adam Hamilton points out, is that the statement "love the sinner," is not what Jesus tells us to do, and it can actually lead us to sin by violating something Jesus did teach his disciples. Although Jesus loved sinners, he never actually said, "Love the sinner." What did he say (an it's an important distinction)? "Love your neighbor."^{iv} And Jesus made it clear that everyone is our neighbor — both people we know and those we haven't met yet. It includes those in our church family that we support and care for, as well as those around the globe that we give generously to help through our mission efforts. It means treating all humans as children of God, doing good to them, and seeking to bless and encourage them.^v

But Jesus didn't stop there. Jesus went as far as to include our enemies — those who have hurt or wronged us, those who wish to do us harm — they too are our neighbor, and they are people we should love and do good for. This is so hard isn't it? Jesus tells us not to return evil for evil or to take an eye for an eye. (As Gandhi is credited with saying, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.") So, if we are called to love our neighbors and love our enemies, why doesn't Jesus ever say, "Love the sinner?"

First, this command would be redundant ó since all of our neighbors ó those we love and those we don't ó are sinners - just like we are. Since we all sin, telling us to love our neighbors covers everyone!

Second, and more importantly, Hamilton notes that if Jesus commanded us to "love the sinner," it changes the way we look at people ó if we focus on loving the sinner instead of loving our neighbor, we start to see others more as sinners than as neighbors. And where does that lead us? To often to judgment. If I love you more as a sinner than as my neighbor, then I focus more on your sin, and before long, I'll start looking for things that are wrong with you. It's not a far step from this point to an attitude of self-righteousness. I confess that I fell into this trap ó this sin if I'm honest, early in my Christian journey. As a very self-righteous 14 year old, brand new to faith, I often found myself identifying sin in another person and telling God, "That person really deserves judgment." How quickly I forgot my own shortcomings and how quick I was to identify the shortcomings of others. Apparently I hadn't read, or taken to heart, Jesus' command to remove the log from my own eye before removing the splinter from someone else's, apparently I couldn't see that I was like the Pharisee who thanked God that he wasn't like the rest of the lowly sinners out there. To this day I can still see the ever-patient God rolling God's eyes at me and then gently nudging and guiding me to the place where I understood what it means to love my neighbor. I am so grateful that God chose not to judge me with the same judgment I felt others deserved. What I came to be reminded of, is that Jesus' nonjudgmental approach is one of the things that draws people to him in the first place.

The second half of our saying "hate the sin" is even more problematic. As we said a few minutes ago, Jesus spent time with dishonest tax collectors, adulterers, prostitutes, and self-righteous religious leaders just to name a few. He ate with them, healed them and called some of

them to be his disciples, but he never said to them, "I love you but I hate your sin." When he forgave sin, he would tell folks to go and sin no more, but instead of talking about their sin, he talked about God's forgiveness. The only time Jesus seems to demonstrate a hatred of sin occurs when the sin is committed by religious leaders – such as the merchants in the temple who were overcharging the poor who needed animals for their sacrifices. This made Jesus angry and he ran them out for their hypocrisy. There was good reason for that. What keeps non-believers away from the church more than about anything else these days? The hypocrisy of those who call themselves Christ followers.

What about Romans 12:9 some of you may ask? In that verse, Paul writes, "Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold to what is good." Here Paul is not telling readers to hate the sin in the lives of others, but to hate the sin/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." Billy Graham put it this way, "It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict; it's God's job to judge; and it's our job to love."^{vi}

Of course, this does not mean that we should keep silent about sin and evil. We must denounce hate and sins that harm, oppress and do evil to others – such as child and spousal abuse, injustice, sexism, racism, the list goes on and on. We should speak up against these – always – but when we say, "Love the sinner, hate the sin," these are not the things we generally refer to.

So where does that leave us this morning? We are to be painfully aware of our own sin and regularly invite God to transform us, heal us and forgive us. And as for others? We need to recognize that we do not see as God sees nor understand how God understands. What we do know and clearly understand that the truth in "Love the sinner, hate the sin," stops with Love.

Period.

As we end this series, let's all remember the whole truths we have unearthed behind the half truths we have studied. In week one we rejected the idea that everything happens for a reason or that everything that happens is God's will. Instead, we say that whatever happens, God works through it, redeeming it and bringing good from it. In week two we challenged the idea that God only helps those who help themselves. While recognizing that God expects us to work and pray, we acknowledge that God indeed helps those who cannot help themselves.

In week three, we worked on the idea that God won't or doesn't give us more than we can bear. We identified this as a half-truth because this implies that God causes or gives us hard times. Instead, we cling to the idea that God will help us handle whatever life brings our way. And then last week we wrestled with how to read and understand Scripture. Now, we recognize the complexity of rightly handling God's word and seek through the person of Jesus to interpret the Bible faithfully.

I trust that this series has been helpful to you in your own spiritual journey, but also in helping you to give hope and encouragement to others, and draw them to the God of love and truth. May it be so for all of us. Amen.

ⁱ Adam Hamilton, "Half Truths," p 141.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 142

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 142-143.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 149

^v Ibid., p. 150.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 159