



**BIRMINGHAM FIRST**  
A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

***Half Truths:***

**“LOVE THE SINNER, HATE THE SIN?”**

Rev. Gary Haller

First United Methodist Church

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*“Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged! You’ll receive the same judgment you give! Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye.” (Matthew 7:1-5)*

In Adam Hamilton’s chapter on “Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin,” he recounts a telling story told by evangelist Billy Graham’s eldest daughter, Gigi. She was her father’s date to *Time* magazine’s seventy-fifth anniversary party, a banquet in Washington, D.C. President Bill Clinton spoke at the event. He had just been impeached by the House of Representatives for perjury and obstruction of justice. The charge of perjury involved what President Clinton had said, under oath, about his relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. At the banquet, Billy Graham and his daughter sat with President and Mrs. Clinton. He was warm and gracious to them. After the dinner ended and Graham and Gigi were riding back to their hotel, the two discussed the difficulties the President and First Lady were going through with so many people gossiping and judging. And, to be honest, Gigi was surprised at how conversant and gracious her father had been. Gigi said her father’s simple comment was, “It’s the Holy Spirit’s job to convict; it’s God’s job to judge; and it’s our job to love.”

“It’s our job to love.” That’s the most concise description of what we are to do as Christians as you’ll ever hear. We conclude this series on *Half Truths* today with what might be the most popular faith cliché of our time: “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” We hear it thrown around a lot as controversial issues are discussed. This statement is popular because it is a rather convenient and safe way of passing judgment on the sins or behavior of others. Christians disagree with the sin or behavior of someone and want to call it out, but they still want to appear loving, and so they say, “I love the sinner but I hate the sin.”

I think you all know that this phrase is not found anywhere in the Bible. Jesus never said this, nor does he do or say anything to endorse this concept. Neither did the Apostle Paul say anything near to this. Instead, Paul overcame the immense conceit and pride he had before being knocked

off his donkey and hearing Christ speak to him. He changed so much that he began the mature task of examining himself and declared that he, himself, was the “chief among sinners.” We know that this phrase “Love the sinner, hate the sin” most likely was taken out of context from something the great Augustine wrote in the late fourth century. Augustine was writing a letter to nuns, asking them to remain chaste. In the letter he called them to “cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum,” which translates roughly to “with love for mankind and hatred of sins.” It has morphed over the centuries from Augustine calling himself out and hating his own sins into something we use to point fingers at others.

Hamilton notes that Mahatma Gandhi wrote something similar in his 1929 autobiography which is cut short and misquoted. Most readers stop at his quote, “Hate the sin and not the sinner,” but the full statement Gandhi made points to the lack of love behind these words. He actually wrote, “Hate 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.” Gandhi recognized that we are so bent toward judging others that we can’t separate hating the sin from hating the sinner.

I know of a pastor who had a troubled man who was thinking about committing suicide call him late one night. He struggled with depression and addiction and had been divorced twice. He grew up in a conservative church and made the mistake of airing his sins in that church. What happened? He was rebuked and shunned by that community. As he talked to this pastor, he said, “You know, I heard a lot about love from Christians but I never felt it. I heard it preached on a lot but I never saw it. The only thing I saw and felt was hate.” He went on to say, “I have hungered and sought after love my whole life and have never found it. I thought I would find it in the church. I was wrong! If I can’t experience love from Christians, the very people in the world who are supposed to show it, then is my life really worth living?”

Fortunately, this pastor was able to console him and show him love. He felt encouraged and made the choice to live. He also became active in that pastor’s church where they did love and accept him. Unfortunately, there are too many people in the world like this young man who feel nothing but hate from Christians. For them “Love the sinner, hate the sin” is not a message of love. Instead, it is thinly disguised hate. It is a big, giant “But”! And what does that mean? Beth Woolsey, a young mother and writer, tells us that what people hear is: “We will love you *but* we will call you Sinner and treat you like a sinner and watch you carefully to determine which of your actions are Sin so we can call you out and hate those things.” Are we surprised, then, when the love of Christ gets lost in this principle?

Jesus knew well our passionate tendency to judge others and focus on their sin. So Jesus continually warned us against judging others. Instead he taught us to love others, our neighbors, and those we perceive to be our enemies. Early in this chapter, Rev. Hamilton talks about various types of sins, he describes venial sin and mortal sin, inadvertent sin and willful sin. He recounts for us the Seven Deadly Sins: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Pride, Sloth, Wrath and Envy. And then he singles out the *one sin* which the church has identified as fathering all other sins, and that is the sin of *pride*.

Pride and judgment are so serious that Jesus even tells a parable about it. He tells a story about tax collectors, who were seen as some of the worst sinners. Tax collectors were Jews who

collaborated with the Roman occupying forces, making them traitors to their people. And they made themselves rich, as they were allowed to keep whatever they collected above what the Romans demanded. And then there were the Pharisees, who were considered to be very righteous, holy people, zealous for the law. And here's what Jesus said:

Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, "God, I thank you that *I'm* not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive!" But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, "God, show mercy to me, a sinner." I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.<sup>1</sup>

Sinners, both. But one was humble, self-aware and repentant. The other was prideful, and couldn't see any sin in himself, and the truth was his pride was the worst sin of all. Luke introduced this parable with these words: "Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust!" Hamilton asks, "Have you ever met people like that? ... Perhaps more importantly, are *you* ever like that?"

The unvarnished truth is that Jesus never says "Love the sinner." What Jesus does say is "Love your neighbor," and then he tells us that incredibly powerful story of the Good Samaritan to show us "Who is our neighbor?" Our neighbor is not the person next door, but anyone, any time, who is in need.

And as you well know, Jesus doesn't stop there. What does he go on to command us? He expressly commands us to "Love your enemy." Love the people who have wronged us, people who might not do unto us as they wish others would do toward them, people who seek to do us ill.

So if we are called to love our neighbors and love our enemies, why doesn't Jesus ever say, "Love the sinner"? Hamilton has a couple of good answers, especially this one: "If Jesus commanded his disciples to 'love the sinner,' they would begin looking at other people more as sinners than as neighbors. That's the danger. And that attitude, inevitably, leads to judgment." Jesus repeatedly warns us, "Judge not, lest you be judged." It's clear that Jesus considered the self-righteousness that leads you down the path to judgmentalism to be the greatest sin of all—because as you judge others, you are going to be judged.

And this is a good place to remind ourselves that 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.

I think one of the most central teachings of Jesus is the one we read at the beginning of this sermon from Matthew 7. It is pivotal to understanding why Jesus was singularly different from all the other religious voices of his time, and why he so pleasantly shocked those who heard him. It's so easy to identify someone as a sinner, as "the enemy" who must be avoided. Lots of people do it all the time and always find a glad following. It's an old ploy: create an enemy, fear the enemy, hate the enemy, rail against the enemy, and you'll have lots of people gather around you. It rarely fails.

But Jesus was so different. "Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. You'll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? How can you say, 'Let *me* take the splinter out of your eye,' when there's a log in your eye? You deceive yourself. First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye."<sup>2</sup> It was judgmentalism, Jesus warned his disciples—then and now—to avoid. And how refreshing that was to those who heard him.

Let me add a personal word. As I read the teachings of Jesus, the last thing I want to do is to judge others. I find myself always being turned back to look at myself, at my heart, at my sinfulness. Jesus warns us against judging others. It's like walking along a path and coming across a rattlesnake smack dab in the middle, shaking its tail at me for all it's worth. I spent a lot of time in New Mexico as a child and youth. 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. 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. 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.

Did Jesus avoid those whom others considered to be sinners? By no means. Quite the opposite. He was accused of consorting with sinners. He spent time with drunkards, prostitutes, thieves, the occasional adulterer, traitors to his people, and countless others. "He eats and drinks with sinners!" was the charge most often leveled at him. It's epitomized by the account in Luke 7. It's a special occasion at Simon's house and Jesus is the guest of honor. And a woman others thought to be a prostitute crashes a dinner party. The woman makes such a scene that Simon is mortified. She weeps before Jesus, then anoints his feet with oil and dries them with her hair, of all things. No self-respecting rabbi would let a woman touch him, let alone a woman like this, and Simon says as much to Jesus. And Jesus rebukes Simon. But to the woman he says, "Your sins are forgiven."

Follow closely the ministry of Jesus. It's a ministry of forgiveness, not condemnation. Time and again, Jesus forgives those others call sinners, saying, "Neither do I condemn you." Beware of judging others.

When "Love the sinner" is our mantra, we've put ourselves in a position of condemning others as sinners, rather than loving them as Jesus commanded us. Imagine this, though. Imagine a

church that genuinely loves others. A church that welcomes the stranger. A church that lets everyone in, not to change them, but to embrace them as children of God. A church that seeks not to reform others or call them sinners, but seeks to reform ourselves; to repent for the ways we've lacked mercy; to ask forgiveness for all our finger-pointing. To act like Jesus came to set us free, not trap or trick us. To humbly admit our fear and our pride and our anger.

As we come to Christ's Table of Forgiveness today, let's all take a lesson from Jesus, okay? Christ's lessons to us were about the ways we are unkind, uncharitable, unmerciful, unloving. He saw those as our deep sin. Let's work together to correct that, to grow and to change. Together.

And let's also take a lesson from Billy Graham: "Our job is to love." Let those with ears, hear.

May we pray? Gracious One, you alone are God. Forgive us for trying to do your job. Help us instead do what you have called us to do with humility, to love others as you have loved us. We pray this through Christ who made your great love known. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:10-14

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7: 1-5