

“Just Love”

October 2, 2022

Half Truths series

I'll be honest. *Love the sinner. Hate the sin.* may be the most difficult half-truth to address because it's the most commonly used in Christian circles. We've heard it. We may have even said it, and it's a challenge to let it go, especially because most of us have good intentions when we use it. We want to be kind and caring.

So we'll start with a light-hearted look as only the comic Calvin & Hobbes can offer: **SLIDES** All jokes aside, I've heard this phrase from family members who struggle with a loved one's choice, friends who want to offer support, and even in a seminary class as we talked about sin, forgiveness, and grace.

One goal of this series is to challenge spiritual clichés and platitudes that are so often used. We need to challenge them because they can do so much damage to our witness as the Body of Christ. In Pastor Adam Hamilton's words, these half-truths can “confuse, discourage, and sometimes alienate” people from God - and from the church. That's not what we want. And blogger Christian Piatt believes that “Christians have a Public Relations problem.” I don't think he's wrong, and some of these phrases aren't helping.

When we take time to think more deeply about some of these phrases, we realize that they're not completely true. They may carry some truth, but more often, they're a mixed-up claim that doesn't help others and, in many ways, attempts to get us off the hook of really engaging in deeper conversation and community. Ultimately, we want to offer Christ - not clichés. And as I continue to read the Gospels, Jesus is always deeply engaged with people. He doesn't offer clichés and walk away, but is in relationships with people.

First, let's look at the origin of this phrase. It's not from Jesus; let's get that out of the way. There are actually two origins. The earlier use comes from St. Augustine, a bishop in North Africa who lived from 354-430 AD. In a letter he wrote to a commune of nuns around 424 AD he encourages them to act *with love for the persons and hatred of sins*.

The second origin of this phrase comes from Mahatma Gandhi's 1929 autobiography. **SLIDE:** Gandhi actually uses the “*hate the sin and not the sinner,*” but the whole of his thought doesn't stop with the phrase. He 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.” It would seem that Gandhi is arguing against this phrase - realizing that it’s far too easy for us to judge one another - and harder to truly love one another.

Lindy Thompson writes, “We don’t like everybody. Our seventh-grade clique mentality has not completely left us and we like excluding. It is much easier to divide than to unite and it makes us feel special and part of something. It’s a completely human reaction, but Jesus wants us to do better than that. He wants us to love everybody. We don’t want to.” That’s a hard truth.

Digging more deeply into this phrase challenges us to be willing to talk about our own sin. Sin literally means “straying off the path” or “missing the mark.” It’s anything we do or don’t do that leads us away from God’s will and way for us. Sin is personal. Sin is corporate. Sin is systemic when we talk about injustice and oppression. We shouldn’t be okay with sin that causes harm to anyone. Coming together as a community and acknowledging our sin is powerful and necessary. We are sinners who need God’s grace, and we worship God who offers grace, calls us to repent, change our ways, and follow God again.

We do a really good job at looking at other people’s sins. We can point out bad behavior in others quite well. We can judge and assume that we know how God feels about others. We’d rather look out the window than in the mirror.

Paul’s claim to the church in Rome is relevant and important for us. “All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.” We are on equal ground, and that’s tough, right? So often, though, we want to be ahead of others - better than.

We have to acknowledge who we are before God. Each of us is a mixture of saint - seeking to be more holy - and sinner - struggling with what separates us from God. Acknowledging who we are before God - both the very good and the not so great - allows us to point to the One who alone can save, make new, reconcile - Jesus Christ.

And if our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we must point to him as the One who redeems. God is in the business of seeking and saving the lost by way of the One who came to be with us in the mess and in the beauty of who we are and what we struggle with. God knows it all; God loves us still. That’s Good News.

We can’t earn God’s love. We don’t deserve it. It’s not our reward for something we do; it’s all about what God does. We are saved by God’s grace

through faith. God calls us to repent - to turn around and come back to God. And love is our response to God's gift of salvation.

And if I'm honest, I have plenty to deal with in my own life rather than examining someone else's life (but it's a lot more fun). I wonder if that's Jesus' point - you have enough to worry about on your own before you go and judge someone else. Jesus uses hyperbole - exaggeration - to make a point, and he makes it because that image of the log in your own eye has staying power!

We're really good at bypassing God's role as Judge and trying to fill in for God. We'd be happy to do that work - thinking that we have the right to make those pronouncements, but we don't. Perhaps Jesus' words should encourage us to be more intentional about looking inward rather than outward. My sense is that when we start to look inward, we'd probably stop there before looking around because there's a lot for us to work on.

And, by the way, one commentator writes that the way we translate "do not judge" may not be strong enough for what it actually says. Jesus was calling out those who were quick to actually condemn others to hell. It was apparently easy for people to write others off as beyond God's redemption and outside of God's grace. But we stand on the promise that no one stands outside of God's love. Grace is grace for everyone, or it's for no one. We don't get to choose.

And so, judgment becomes an issue of pride, which is a serious sin. We struggle with pride - with holding ourselves to a different standard and letting ourselves off the hook while we focus on everyone except ourselves. I'm not advocating for self-loathing, but I am advocating for honesty with ourselves because that's what Jesus calls us to.

Love the sinner. Hate the sin. isn't from Jesus, and it's done real damage - sometimes driving people away from community rather than bringing them into community. If there's one thing that I've noticed, Jesus is always restoring people to community. Someone tweeted, "That philosophy is 25% love, and 75% hate, sinner, sin, and we can't figure out why it hasn't worked???" This is especially true when we're talking about social issues like sexual orientation and gender identity. I know that we're not of one mind on these issues, but I hope we can agree that our job is to love - just love.

And I've thought about the difference between accountability and judgment because that's important when we live in community together. Some would say that it's loving to name sin, and I get that. Love does mean accountability, but

Jesus focuses on God's forgiveness every time. His anger is fueled when religious leaders show hypocrisy, and part of that is pointing out others' sins and acting as though we don't sin.

How do we hold one another accountable in the Body of Christ? We can't really practice accountability until there's a relationship of trust and care. I can't hold you accountable, and I don't want you to hold me accountable, unless I trust you and believe that you care about me. Throwing around clichés doesn't help us at all.

What Jesus does say is important: *Love your neighbor*. Neighbors, by Jesus' account in parables, are the people around us and anyone in need. We're called to bless, encourage, show kindness, and do good for them.

The same goes for another thing Jesus did say: *Love your enemies*. Pastor Adam Hamilton writes, "I think Jesus knew that if he commanded his disciples to 'love the sinner,' they would begin looking at other people more as sinners than neighbors. And that, inevitably, would lead to judgment. If I love you more as a sinner than as my neighbor, then I am bound to focus more on your sin. I will start looking for all the things that are wrong with you. And perhaps, without intending it, I will be thinking about our relationship like this: "You are a sinner, but I graciously choose to love you anyway."" When we push it to the limit, that's where, *Love the sinner. Hate the sin*. can lead us. We can see where pride and arrogance creep in quickly.

SLIDE: "Your job is not to judge. Your job is not to figure out if someone deserves something. Your job is to lift the fallen, to restore the broken, and to heal the hurting." If that's our focus, then the world changes. We're closer to Jesus, who spent time washing feet as an act of loving service to those who would turn away from him! Jesus chose to spend time washing the feet of his disciples before he was crucified.

Earlier this year, there was a series of images on a website called the Salt and Gold Store showing Jesus washing feet of specific politicians, a prison inmate, Judas, a child, a prostitute, a person sitting looking at their phone, and more. The tagline of the site is: "It's not about who's on the seat, it's about Who's washing the feet." These images are powerful because they challenge us to think about what it means to love - really love like Jesus - to love our neighbor and love our enemies.

The ultimate question is: Do we see one another as sinners or neighbors? Do we live the way of Jesus, who calls us to see one another as neighbors. We're all sinners, that's true, but to one another, we're called to be neighbors. To flip the script, we might say this: *Love your neighbor Love your enemy. Love one another as Jesus loves you.* That's the truth. What a powerful word as we come to the table. This is a feast of love.

End with **"Love God's Way"**

Just love.

Thanks be to God. Amen. Let us pray...