

That's Not in the Bible Sermon Series
#3 – Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin - Matt. 9:9-13
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Does God hate? Sorry, no small talk, we're just gonna jump right in today. Does God hate? I did a search of the Bible for the terms "God" and "hate" to see how many verses contain those two words. I found 18 instances, but most of them were like this from one of John's letters: "Those who say they love God and hate their brothers and sisters are liars." The only verse I found where God hates something was this one from Deuteronomy: "You shall not plant any tree as a sacred pole beside the altar that you make for the LORD your God; nor shall you set up a stone pillar—things that the LORD your God hates." So you may want to think twice about that sacred pole you were going to put next to your altar. Other than that, I think you're good.

Does God hate? I would think God hates things like evil, murder, and war. But does God hate people? That's the question raised by our Christian cliché today, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." Is that in the Bible? It sure sounds biblical. It's got the word "sin" in it, which is a pretty good indicator. And it sounds graceful and compassionate, at least on the surface. It seems to say that regardless of who you are or what you've done, I still love you. That feels Bible-y, doesn't it? I could hear Jesus saying this. Guess what – not in the Bible. In fact, it's not even close to anything Jesus ever said.

In our reading today, we have an example of how Jesus dealt with sinners and their sin. Jesus calls Matthew, a hated tax collector, to follow him. Matthew is so excited he invites all his fellow sinners to his house for a party! And then Jesus shows up. You might think he was there to condemn those heathens, but instead he pulls out a corkscrew and a wine glass and joins in the fun! When the Pharisees criticize Jesus' choice of partygoers, he says, "I desire mercy (which also translates as steadfast love), not sacrifice. I haven't come for all you righteous folks, I've only come for the sinners." You see what he did there, right? The Pharisees were also sinners, but it was easier to call someone else that name. No qualification here from Jesus about only loving the sinner as long as you promise to hate the sin.

There's another story that is instructive here. In this one, the Pharisees bring an adulterous woman to Jesus and ask him if the law is right that she should be stoned to death for her sin. Jesus says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." You see what he did there, right? This Jesus was a pretty funny guy. He knew that the stone-throwers were just as sinful as the woman. There was no way they could hate this woman's sin and still love her as a person. "We love you, Gertrude, so just remember that as we're hurtling these boulders at you."

"Love the sinner, hate the sin." To do that, we have to know what a sin is, and the Bible is notoriously vague on details. We get a few lists here and there, but they are more representative than exhaustive. Paul says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," but he doesn't go on to offer a checklist of what counts and what doesn't. And we crafty humans have devised all sorts of sins that weren't even around when the Bible was written, like not using your turn signal. So how do we know what's a sin and what's not?

The definition I've always used is that a sin is anything we do or fail to do that hinders us from loving God and loving each other. But I would guess that for people who use this statement about hating the sin and loving the sinner, that's not the definition they use. I think their definition of sin is anything that someone else does that they don't agree with or that goes

against their understanding of God and faith and the Bible. You see what they do there, right? You hear the judgment embedded in the statement? I love you, but I hate that thing you're doing that doesn't fit with what I think you should be doing.

I have most often heard this statement said in relation to homosexuality. I was surprised to find that, in researching this sermon, all the sermons I read or listened to on this specific cliché talked about how it is used as a veiled condemnation of gays and lesbians, just as it was probably used in previous eras to condemn alcoholics or drug users. Regardless of your belief on this issue, it's important to note that there are 3-4 passages in the Bible that speak about same-sex relations, none of which correspond to our modern understanding of homosexuality and none of which were said by Jesus. But there are hundreds of verses about the evils of money and greed, most of which *were* said by Jesus. And yet, I can't ever remember someone saying to a church-going non-giver, "I love them, but I hate their greed." My point is this cliché tends to be used to name something that only someone else could do, something that is easy to look down on and judge in the other person.

"Love the sinner, hate the sin." It's easy to pass this off as a statement of compassion – Look, I'm loving you even though you're a sinner!" But "love" isn't the word that stands out in this statement. If you tell a child that you love them but you hate what they've done, which part of that statement will they remember? Hate drowns out any efforts to love. You can't hate a part of a person and still say you love them. Let me put that another way. Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins. Now, imagine walking up to someone and saying, "You know, gluttony is a sin. I love you, but I hate your blubber." Will that person thank you for loving them in spite of their sin? By the way, if the person is bigger than you, I highly recommend not testing this with them.

This phrase uses the term "sinner" as if it's almost a term of endearment. "Hey sinner! There's my favorite sinner!" But the judgment lies in the use of the term itself. Did you know Jesus never called someone a sinner? He told people to go and sin no more, he said he came to call the sinners, but he never looks someone in the eye and says, "You are a sinner." He was not in the sin-accounting business. So, as soon as we sit in the seat of judgment over someone else and label them a sinner, we've missed the point. Jesus doesn't judge the sinners; he parties with them, eats dinner with them, spends time with them. He didn't act like they were sinners. They were his friends. People with names. Defined as beloved children of God, not defined by their sins. The only people he judges are those who think they've got all their stuff together. He judges the righteous for being self-righteous, for spewing hate speech about the speck in someone else's eye while ignoring the log in their own.

"Love the sinner, hate the sin." This phrase is attributed to Gandhi, but listen to what he says in his autobiography: "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." Can you claim to love someone while you're throwing stones at them? I think when you define a person by their sin, you've already started hating them. The love you profess to have for them is conditional, measured out in proportion to just how much you hate their sin as you have defined it.

So if Jesus doesn't instruct us to hate the sin and love the sinner, does he have anything to say about this? In another part of Matthew's gospel, those pesky Pharisees try to trap Jesus by saying, "We've got all these great laws. Honor thy father and mother. Don't kill. Keep off the grass. Tell us, Jesus, which one is the greatest?" And Jesus says, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." No conditions there. No disclaimers about what to do if your neighbor

happens to be a sinner. Just love God and love your neighbor. If we do that, I wonder what would happen to all the hate that seems to dominate our world.

If we want to hate a sin, maybe the place to start isn't with the world or our sinful neighbor. Maybe the place to start dealing with sin is within ourselves. Comedian Mark Lowry says this: "Love the sinner, hate the sin? How about: Love the sinner, hate your own sin. I don't have time to hate your sin. There are too many of you! Hating my sin is a full-time job. How about you hate your sin, I'll hate my sin and let's just love each other!"

Let's just love each other. I like that strategy. Let's not try to parse out the behaviors we don't approve of. Let's not look down on someone because we don't agree with their choices. Let's not ration out our love based on the type and severity of sins a person commits. If you love someone, you love all of them – even when they make choices that are sinful in your eyes. That doesn't mean you have to condone those choices, but you love the person who made them, not judge them for making them.

"Love the sinner, hate the sin." For too long the church has been known as a place that hates the sin and the sinner. What would people think about us if we practiced steadfast love, not judgment? What would people think about us if we loved the sinners, all the sinners, and left the definition and judgment of sin to God? What would people think about us if instead of loving the sinner and hating the sin, we loved God and loved our neighbor, even the sinful ones, starting with ourselves?

Gandhi is also quoted as saying, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ." So let's agree to hate who Jesus hates, which was...well, no one. Let's agree to call a "sinner" the person Jesus called a sinner, which was...well, no one. Let's agree to love who Jesus loved, which was...well, everyone. It's not our job to judge, to condemn, to label. Let God do that heavy lifting as God sees fit. If you really want to hate someone's sin, start with your own. And then, once you've stopped sinning, you can start hating someone else's. But until then, let's love one another. After all, that is so like Christ.