LOVE THE SINNER, HATE THE SIN?

As we continue our series, Is That Really in the Bible, we’re asking that question this morning of the statement, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” People on the video made their guesses. What’s yours—Augustine, Gandhi, Jesus, or Joel Osteen?

- I’m not sure if sin is in Joel Osteen’s vocabulary or not, so maybe he’s said it, maybe not.

- Augustine did say it ... well, sort of. In his Letter 211 from around A.D. 424, Augustine used a Latin phrase which translated reads: “with love for mankind and hatred of sins.”

- And Gandhi said it too ... well, sort of. In his 1929 autobiography, Gandhi penned the phrase, “Hate the sin and not the sinner.”

But is this phrase really in the Bible? Did Jesus say it too? Well, sort of. I invite you to open your Bible this morning to Luke 6:27-38. These are words of Jesus—Luke’s account of Jesus’ sermon on the plain, lots of connections with Matthew’s account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The phrase is “love the sinner, hate the sin.” So let’s read Jesus’ words and see if you hear it in there somewhere. The word of the Lord ... (read the text).

Did you hear “love the sinner, hate the sin” in Jesus’ words? Sort of? Maybe? There’s certainly a lot in there about loving sinners:

- Love your enemies.
- Do good to those who hate you.
- Bless those who curse you.
- Pray for those who abuse you.
- Instead of fighting back, turn the other cheek.
- Give to the one who begs from you.
- Treat others like you want to be treated.
• Be merciful.
• Don’t judge or condemn people.
• Forgive people who sin against you.

There’s a lot in there about loving sinners—and not just in words either but in actions. Anybody can love people who love them back, says Jesus, even sinners do that. The same goes for being nice to people who are nice to you and for lending to people who can pay you back. Sinners do that kind of stuff every day.

But, says Jesus, we disciples are not supposed to model the way we love after the way sinners love. Our model is God. Love like God loves. And just how does God love? God “is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. So be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” Or to put it in a simpler way: love sinners. There’s a lot in our text about loving sinners.

What’s missing in this text is anything about hating sin. That doesn’t mean that Jesus is neutral about sin or shies away from talking about sin. He uses the word sinners four times in this text. And last week we read a text in Mark in which Jesus listed the sins that take root in our hearts: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride foolishness. Jesus said, “All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mk. 7:20-23). Jesus isn’t soft on sin. He doesn’t sugarcoat it when He talks about it. He doesn’t reframe sin as simple mistakes or failures or goofs. He describes it with the e-word: evil. And He doesn’t just talk about sin in the abstract or as a philosophical category. He names it: slander, murder, envy, you heard the list.

And I think it’s safe to say the Jesus hates sin. Jesus and the Father are one (Jn. 10:30). They think alike. And the Bible is not shy about God’s attitude toward sin. Proverbs 6:16-19 reads:

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.”
God hates these sins. He hates them. God is holy and righteous altogether. He is pure good and pure light. There is no darkness in Him at all. God is sinless perfection. Sin is more than a nuisance to God, more than a pesky fly buzzing about His quarters. Sin is an affront to God. As John Bunyan put it, “Sin is the dare of God’s justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeer of His patience, the slight of His power, and the contempt of His love.”† God hates sin.

And the Bible goes so far as to say that God even hates sinners. Listen to Psalm 5:4-6:

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

Holy smokes! That ought to be enough to strike fear in our hearts and curl our toes. Strong and frightening words. Gary Larson of Far Side fame did a cartoon captioned, “God at his computer.” The picture is of an old cranky God watching on his computer monitor as some poor shlub is walking down the street minding his own business. Unbeknownst to the man a piano being lowered on a rope hangs precariously over his head, while God’s hand is suspended over the keyboard, God’s finger poised over the smite button ready to strike. Is that a biblical portrayal of God? Does Larson get God right? Does God love a lucky few, hate most of us, and get righteous joy by smiting random sinners when the mood strikes Him? Instead of “love the sinner, hate the sin,” is it more biblical to say “hate the sin and the sinner”?

No, that wouldn’t be more biblical. And here’s why: because the Bible teaches in both Testaments that God loves sinners too. We can’t find one reference that indicates God ever loves sin, but there’s plenty that proclaim His love for sinners.

How about that text in Ezekiel 33 when God says,

And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, “Thus you have said, ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?’ Say to them, “As I live, ❤️❤️❤️

declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn back from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (33:10-11).

And what about that text in Hosea where God says through the prophet to His sinful people, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender” (11:8).

Do you hear the love and the pathos in those appeal?

And how about that great text in Romans 5?

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us ... For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life (5:6-8, 10).

We’re described in that text as ungodly, sinners, and enemies of God, and yet God loved us enough to save us from our sins and reconcile us to himself through the death of His Son Jesus. God loves sinners all right.

There’s no question that God hates sin, but what about sinners? Does God love sinners or hate sinners? We’ve seen Bible texts that say both things. But here’s the deal: God’s love and God’s hate are in a whole other dimension from ours. God can do both of these perfectly, because He is God. God can hate without any sinful intent. God can hate the sin and the sinner in a perfectly holy way and still be willing to lovingly forgive the sinner the moment the sinner turns to God in repentance and faith. So while we humans could never pull that off, God can. For God’s hatred of sinners is without malice and with a view towards the cure rather than punishment.

God leans toward love and mercy. The Bible repeatedly describes God as slow to anger and full of mercy. God would rather save sinners than judge them, spare them rather than destroy them. Why do you think God spared Adam and Eve after their sin in the garden? Why do you think God found a
family to spare from the great flood? Why do you think God always found a remnant of His people to spare whenever judgment fell? Why do you think God sent Jesus to die for our sins on the cross? Because it was the only way God could pour out His righteous wrath on our sins and on us without destroying us in the process. God hates sin, but God loves sinners. Isn’t that the gospel in a nutshell: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believed in him would not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16)?

Though a bit simplistic and without a proof-text in the Bible to back it up, the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” is biblical insofar as God is concerned.

But is it biblical for you and me? Does the Bible call us to “love the sinner and hate the sin”? Well, as we’ve seen already in our Luke text, Jesus certainly calls us to love sinners—enemies, abusers, persons who want to take advantage of us. They’re sinners all right, and God calls us to love them and treat them with generosity and kindness. God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. So God wants us to practice His kind of love rather than the self-serving, “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” love of the sinner. There’s no way we can weasel out of that. God wants us to love sinners.

And God wants us to hate sin too. In the obscure little letter of Jude, that one chapter epistle just before Revelation, Jude writes in vv. 22-23:

And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.

“The garment stained by the flesh” is a metaphor for sin, and the Bible tells us to hate it. Hating sin is the easiest part of this equation. It’s not hard for us to hate sin. Most of us have seen what sin does to people: how it wrecks relationships, ruins families, crushes spirits, destroys lives, steals futures, bankrupts souls, hardens hearts, blinds minds to the truth, makes people selfish, greedy, impatient, lustful, mean, vindictive, hateful, cruel, angry, bitter, broken. Who doesn’t hate what sin does to people and the toll it takes on the good creation God put in place?

It’s not that hard to hate sin. And it doesn’t have to be a passive hatred either. When we refuse to take part in sin, when we refuse to condone it, when
we call sin by its name and condemn it rather than ignore it or excuse it, we are hating sin. It’s not that hard to hate sin—especially the sins of others.

What’s hard for us is to hate sin without hating the sinner in the process. God can pull that off flawlessly—you and me, not so well. We tend to identify a person’s sin with the person. We are quick to define others by their sins. Instead of thinking, “He’s fallen to adultery,” we define him as an adulterer. Instead of thinking, “She told a lie,” we define her as a liar. Instead of thinking, “He struggles with homosexual feelings and is tempted to that behavior,” we define him as a homosexual. Instead of thinking, “That girl struggles with arrogance,” we define her as an egotistical snob. And when we do, we’re it’s very difficult for us not to hate the sin without also hating the sinner. God can pull this off, no sweat.

We see Jesus doing this a lot. Jesus spent some time at a well with a shady lady from Sychar who had been divorced five times and was shacking up with man number six. Instead of coming to the well in the morning with other village women, she came in the middle of the day by herself to avoid their judgmental glares, angry stares, and cold shoulders. But one day Jesus is at the well when she arrives. Much to the woman’s surprise Jesus talks with her. He even names her sins. Yet as the story unfolds, the woman experiences Jesus’ love in their conversation and races back to town telling the people, “Come meet a man who has forgiven my sin. Come meet a man who doesn’t hold my past against me. Come meet a man who has replaced the stench of my sin with the fragrance of His grace. Come meet a man who saved me and changed me and can do the same for you.” Instead of just dismissing her as an adulteress, Jesus saw what she could become if she could only taste His grace. Jesus was able to love this sinner and hate her sin in a way that led to her salvation and a brand new beginning.

Jesus did the same with a couple of tax-collectors: one named Matthew and one named Zacchaeus. Instead of defining them by their greed and by their treason against Israel, Jesus saw in Matthew a man who could be one of His twelve disciples, and He saw in Zacchaeus an honest, generous man who, freed from the shackles of his sin, could be a blessing to many.

Jesus did this with many sinners along the way. The people He had the hardest time reaching were the righteous folks, the ones who specialized in pointing out and hating everybody else’s sins, but who were blind to their own. The phrase is “love the sinner, hate the sin,” and God pulls that off flawlessly.
It’s a lot harder for us, but it is possible. C. S. Lewis puts that in perspective for us all. He writes in *Mere Christianity*:

Now that I come to think of it, I remember Christian teachers telling me long ago that I must hate a bad man’s actions, but not hate the bad man: or, as they would say, hate the sin but not the sinner.

For a long time I used to think this a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life—namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things. Consequently, Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them. Not one word of what we have said about them needs to be unsaid. But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry that the man should have done such things, and hoping, if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere he can be cured and made human again.²

“Love the sinner, hate the sin”—we practice it with ourselves all time. Let’s practice it with others.

It begins as we grow in our walk with Jesus. The closer we draw to Jesus, the more we think like He thinks, love like He loves, serve like He serves, see people as He sees people. There’s no way we can love like Jesus calls us to love in our Luke text without the grace and strength of Jesus doing that through us. You find it hard to love your enemy? Jesus can love that enemy through you. You find it hard to be kind to the ungrateful and the evil? Jesus can work that kindness through you. You find it hard not to be constantly judging the sinners in your life and in our world? Jesus can help you look at them with compassion instead. You find it hard not to define people by their sin, to see pretty much that and only that? Jesus can help you

see what that person could be through the grace of God. You find it hard to forgive those who have sinned against you? Jesus can forgive them through you. The more you grow in your walk with Jesus, the more you spend time with Him, study Him, talk with Him, seek Him, the better you’ll be able to love the sinner rather than hating both the sin and the sinner.

We can also practice this by practicing basic hospitality to all people God puts in our path. Hospitality has always marked the church—especially in the earliest history of the church. As one church historian claims, “While contemporary Christians tend to equate morality with sexual ethics, our ancestors defined morality as welcoming the stranger.” The love of all people, regardless of race, gender, class, tribe, or religion, marked the early church. When cities were ravaged by plagues, it was the church that stayed to tend to the sick and dying. Everybody else ran for their lives. What if you would begin to view the people in your life as God views them? What if rather than thinking about all the ways they are different than you or more sinful than you or somehow beneath you or even a bit frightening to you … what if you began to practice hospitality toward them anyway—noticing them, acknowledging them, relating to them. This will take us all a step closer to practicing a love for the sinner in spite of his sins.

And who knows? At some point, as you relate to sinners, you may even have opportunity to talk with them about their sins. Don’t go there first. But you might get there and because the sinner knows you love her, her ears and heart may be attuned to your call for her to turn from her sins to life and forgiveness in Christ. Jesus did this when He walked the earth. And He can still do this as He continues to walk the earth through our feet and our hands and our hearts and our mouths.

Loving the sinner while hating their sin can be like walking a tightrope—it requires intentional efforts at balance. And if you fall, fall towards love—the profound kind of love Jesus teaches us in our text in Luke. If we’ll focus on the loving the sinner, God will handle the sin part in the person’s life.

Earlier this year I read a story of how this principle worked itself out in the life of Rosaria Champagne Butterfield.

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The word *Jesus* stuck in my throat like an elephant tusk; no matter how hard I choked, I couldn't hack it out. Those who professed the name commanded my pity and wrath. As a university professor, I tired of students who seemed to believe that "knowing Jesus" meant knowing little else. Christians in particular were bad readers, always seizing opportunities to insert a Bible verse into a conversation with the same point as a punctuation mark: to end it rather than deepen it.


As a professor of English and women’s studies, on the track to becoming a tenured radical, I cared about morality, justice, and compassion. Fervent for the worldviews of Freud, Hegel, Marx, and Darwin, I strove to stand with the disempowered. I valued morality. And I probably could have stomached Jesus and his band of warriors if it weren't for how other cultural forces buttressed the Christian Right. Pat Robertson’s quip from the 1992 Republican National Convention pushed me over the edge: "Feminism," he sneered, "encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians." Indeed. The surround sound of Christian dogma comingling with Republican politics demanded my attention.

After my tenure book was published, I used my post to advance the understandable allegiances of a leftist lesbian professor. My life was happy, meaningful, and full. My partner and I shared many vital interests: aids activism, children's health and literacy, Golden Retriever rescue, our Unitarian Universalist church, to name a few. Even if you believed the ghost stories promulgated by Robertson and his ilk, it was hard to argue that my partner and I were anything but good citizens and caregivers. The GLBT community values hospitality and applies it with skill, sacrifice, and integrity.

I began researching the Religious Right and their politics of hatred against queers like me. To do this, I would need to read the one book that had, in my estimation, gotten so many people off track: the Bible. While on the lookout for some Bible scholar to aid me in my research, I launched my first attack on the unholy trinity of Jesus, Republican politics, and patriarchy, in the form of an article in the local newspaper about Promise Keepers. It was 1997.
The article generated many rejoinders, so many that I kept a Xerox box on each side of my desk: one for hate mail, one for fan mail. But one letter I received defied my filing system. It was from the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. It was a kind and inquiring letter. Ken Smith encouraged me to explore the kind of questions I admire: How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know you are right? Do you believe in God? Ken didn't argue with my article; rather, he asked me to defend the presuppositions that undergirded it. I didn't know how to respond to it, so I threw it away.

Later that night, I fished it out of the recycling bin and put it back on my desk, where it stared at me for a week, confronting me with the worldview divide that demanded a response. As a postmodern intellectual, I operated from a historical materialist worldview, but Christianity is a supernatural worldview. Ken's letter punctured the integrity of my research project without him knowing it.

With the letter, Ken initiated two years of bringing the church to me, a heathen. Oh, I had seen my share of Bible verses on placards at Gay Pride marches. That Christians who mocked me on Gay Pride Day were happy that I and everyone I loved were going to hell was clear as blue sky. That is not what Ken did. He did not mock. He engaged. So when his letter invited me to get together for dinner, I accepted. My motives at the time were straightforward: Surely this will be good for my research.

Something else happened. Ken and his wife, Floy, and I became friends. They entered my world. They met my friends. We did book exchanges. We talked openly about sexuality and politics. They did not act as if such conversations were polluting them. They did not treat me like a blank slate. When we ate together, Ken prayed in a way I had never heard before. His prayers were intimate. Vulnerable. He repented of his sin in front of me. He thanked God for all things. Ken's God was holy and firm, yet full of mercy. And because Ken and Floy did not invite me to church, I knew it was safe to be friends.

I started reading the Bible. I read the way a glutton devours. I read it many times that first year in multiple translations. At a dinner gathering my partner and I were hosting, my transgendered friend J cornered me in the kitchen. She put her large hand over mine. "This Bible reading is changing you, Rosaria," she warned.
With tremors, I whispered, "J, what if it is true? What if Jesus is a real and risen Lord? What if we are all in trouble?"

J exhaled deeply. "Rosaria," she said, "I was a Presbyterian minister for 15 years. I prayed that God would heal me, but he didn't. If you want, I will pray for you."

I continued reading the Bible, all the while fighting the idea that it was inspired. But the Bible got to be bigger inside me than I. It overflowed into my world. I fought against it with all my might. Then, one Sunday morning, I rose from the bed of my lesbian lover, and an hour later sat in a pew at the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. Conspicuous with my butch haircut, I reminded myself that I came to meet God, not fit in. The image that came in like waves, of me and everyone I loved suffering in hell, vomited into my consciousness and gripped me in its teeth.

I fought with everything I had.

I did not want this.

I did not ask for this.

I counted the costs. And I did not like the math on the other side of the equal sign.

But God's promises rolled in like sets of waves into my world. One Lord's Day, Ken preached on John 7:17: "If anyone wills to do [God's] will, he shall know concerning the doctrine" (NKJV). This verse exposed the quicksand in which my feet were stuck. I was a thinker. I was paid to read books and write about them. I expected that in all areas of life, understanding came before obedience. And I wanted God to show me, on my terms, why homosexuality was a sin. I wanted to be the judge, not one being judged.

But the verse promised understanding after obedience. I wrestled with the question: Did I really want to understand homosexuality from God's point of view, or did I just want to argue with him? I prayed that night that God would give me the willingness to obey before I understood. I prayed long into the unfolding of day. When I looked in the mirror, I looked the same. But when I looked into my heart through the lens of the Bible, I wondered, *Am I a lesbian, or has this all been a case of mistaken identity? If Jesus could split the world*
asunder, divide marrow from soul, could he make my true identity prevail? Who am I? Who will God have me to be?

Then, one ordinary day, I came to Jesus, openhanded and naked. In this war of worldviews, Ken was there. Floy was there. The church that had been praying for me for years was there. Jesus triumphed. And I was a broken mess. Conversion was a train wreck. I did not want to lose everything that I loved. But the voice of God sang a sanguine love song in the rubble of my world. I weakly believed that if Jesus could conquer death, he could make right my world. I drank, tentatively at first, then passionately, of the solace of the Holy Spirit. I rested in private peace, then community, and today in the shelter of a covenant family, where one calls me "wife" and many call me "mother."

I have not forgotten the blood Jesus surrendered for this life.

And my former life lurks in the edges of my heart, shiny and still like a knife.⁴