

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

Sunday, February 3, 2019

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

---

John 8:1–11

Today I conclude our series called “Does the Bible Say That?” In this series, we have taken a look at common platitudes of faith. Sometimes we see them on bumper stickers. Sometimes we hear them from well-meaning family members or friends. Perhaps some of you may say these phrases to others. Some folks think these phrases come straight from the Bible when they are nowhere to be found in scripture

Quite often these popular phrases of faith are casually said without really thinking through what they mean. So we have taken a closer look at these popular phrases of faith and tested them with scripture and Christian tradition. My hope is that this series has encouraged us to think deeper about our faith. I also hope it has helped us think twice before repeating these phrases.

The first week we explored the phrase, “Everything happens for a reason.” We learned that’s not true. Often times things happen because people choose to do foolish things! Everything that happens to you is not God’s will, but God has a will in everything that happens to you. God can redeem your suffering and do something good with it.

Next we looked at the phrase, “The Lord helps those who help themselves.” We discovered that the gospel message goes in the opposite direction. The Lord does help those who can’t help themselves. That’s what grace is all about.

Then we looked at the phrase, “God will never give you more than you can handle.” Not true. We will face events in life that we can’t handle on our own and they are not from God. But God can help us handle them. Our confidence is in God and not in ourselves.

Last week we explored the often-quoted phrase, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” We learned that when it comes to interpreting the Bible, it’s not always that simple. The Bible must be interpreted and applied to our context today. We must interpret scripture through the lens of what Jesus has taught us.

We conclude this series today with what I think is the most popular faith cliché of our time: “Love the

sinner, hate the sin.” We hear it thrown around a lot in Christian circles today 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 another 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.”

In theory this sounds good and virtuous. We can have the best of both worlds. I can love people that I judge and still have integrity with disagreeing with their sin. But see, that’s the problem. Most of us only see this phrase from the perspective of the one saying it and not the one receiving it. And the fact is all of us are sinners!

Let’s get real folks. Nobody can hold to this principle. No one can hold this distinction. It’s been my experience that when someone tries to hold to this principle they just wind up hating the sinner. I have never known a person in my life who said, “You know, my Christian friend hates my sin, but I know she really loves me.” Honestly, this phrase is hate dressed up really pretty. This phrase is for those who have been seduced into thinking that compassion is weakness and a hard heart is moral discernment.

I have a colleague who had someone call him late one night who was thinking about committing suicide. 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 to the church. He was rebuked and shunned from the community. As he talked to my colleague, he said, “You know, I heard a lot about love from Christians but I never felt it. I heard it preached 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 the very people in the world who are supposed to show it, then is my life really worth living?”

Fortunately, my colleague was able to console him and show him love. He felt encouraged and made

the choice to live. He also became active in my colleague's church where they loved and accepted him.

Unfortunately, there are too many people in the world like the caller 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 also a big, giant "But"! What does that mean? Beth Woolsey wisely tells us that when many people are the target of this phrase, this is what they really hear: "*We will love you BUT we will call you 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 why many people don't want to come to church? If that was your only experience of the church, would you go to church? I wouldn't!

"Love the sinner, hate the sin" needs to be stricken from the Christian lexicon. Because, at the end of the day **"Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin" is not biblical.**

The irony is that many folks who are often fond of saying this phrase are lovers of scripture and can quote you chapter and verse. But you won't find "Love the sinner, hate the sin" in scripture.

So where does it come from? Well, it comes from St. Augustine, from his work, "Confessions." The exact quote is "*With love for humankind, and hatred of sins.*" When Augustine wrote these words he was referring to his own sins. He was calling himself out on the sins he had committed. But over the centuries Augustine's quote has morphed into a way that helps folks point fingers at others.

When people say this phrase around me I always reply, "That's funny." "What's funny?" they usually asked. I reply, "Don't you see that big log in your eye? Don't you see one in my eye?" Jesus said in Matthew:

**"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. —Matthew 7:3–5**

It is clear that Jesus did not teach us to "Love the sinner and hate the sin." In fact, he called it hypocritical. He taught the exact opposite. He taught us to **"Love the sinner and hate your own sin."** Jesus told us to focus on our own sins and issues that need work before we start talking about the sins of others. I don't know about

you, but I have enough sins and shortcomings to work on to be meddling in the lives of others. How about you?

The truth is the Bible never really gives us permission to judge sin. In fact, when we judge sin, we commit sin. When we sit in judgment on the sins of others, we are playing God and that is idolatry. Now some folks disagree with me on that and they will quote a text from Romans 12:9:

**Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. —Romans 12:9**

This passage does not give us permission to hate other people's sin; it requires us to hate our own sin. Look at the context of this text and think through this. Ken Collins says it well, "Can you make someone else's love genuine? No, you can only make your own love genuine. Can you make another person hold fast to what is good? No, you can only make yourself do that. You can only hate the sin that is inside you, because you are the only human being who knows what is going on inside you. Since you cannot see inside other people, you cannot correctly identify what is inside them, and that means that you are not commanded, permitted, or even qualified to hate someone else's sin. On the other hand, we are not just qualified and permitted, we are commanded to love sinners."

Other folks who disagree with me will point to other passages in the Bible that speak of judging fellow believers and helping them. Well, this has to do with accountability, not hating sin and judging others. Accountability begins with someone giving another person permission to hold them accountable. This is much different from judging or hating someone's sin, which is usually done without permission. When we are transformed by the love of Christ, we desire and make the choice to be part of a group of believers who will help and encourage us. A key aspect of the help and encouragement is for them to know our weaknesses and sins and to hold us accountable. This is a far cry from getting permission to hate and judge the sins of others.

This leads me to another reason why the phrase "Love the sinner, hate the sin" needs to be eradicated from the church: **Jesus did not teach us to call people sinners; he called us to call people neighbors.**

Jesus did have some choice words for some folks like "hypocrite," "fool," and "brood of vipers." But the fascinating thing is Jesus reserved his name-calling for the religious community. Just the read the gospels and you will find that the only thing that angered Jesus was the self-righteousness and hypocrisy of religious people. Jesus only had love and compassion for the broken-down, broken-hearted, the excluded, the lonely and the outcast. He made them feel big, not small.

Woolsey reminds us that Jesus never teaches us to love the sinner. He teaches us to love our neighbor! And to Jesus who is our neighbor? Everyone—the despised, rejected, excluded, ignored, and bullied.

Over and over again we find Jesus inviting sinners to dinner, accepting and helping prostitutes and defending the marginalized. Remember that powerful scene in the eighth chapter of the gospel of John where a woman is caught in adultery? The people are getting ready to stone her to death because the law demanded it. And what did Jesus do? He saved her and scattered the crowd by saying, “He who is without sin cast the first stone.”

Now I know what some of you may be thinking. “Charley, but remember, Jesus did tell her ‘Your sins are forgiven’ but he also told her to ‘Go and sin no more.’ What about that? What about repentance? You are not preaching the whole gospel! Jesus said to sin no more.” That’s right. He did say that. Let’s take a closer look at the text, shall we?

**The crowd] said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. [The Law] commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus ... said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”**  
—John 8:1–11

Most Christians miss something huge in this text. What did Jesus do in this story? Woolsey reminds us that Jesus defended the woman from the crowd. And who is the crowd? The religious people. Us! So, in this text, Jesus defended the woman from us! Jesus defended the woman from those who wanted to sit in judgment and throw stones. He told that crowd to scam. He told those who said “Love the sinner, hate the sin” to beat it.

It was only after the crowd left that Jesus, and only Jesus, told her to sin no more. The crowd was not there at all. Only Jesus and this woman. Why? Because it is not our job to change the hearts of people. It’s not our job to transform people. That’s Jesus’ job. Our job is to love people as Jesus loves them so they will be receptive to the love and power of Jesus.

Nowhere in this text do we find Jesus saying, “Hey crowd, tell this lady not to sin anymore.” And

why? Because it is not our job! Jesus never instructs the crowd to point out the woman’s sin or exclude her. Jesus never says to the crowd, “I told her to sin no more, now *you go* tell people not to sin, too.” **“The only instruction that we receive from Jesus is to examine our own lives for sin” (Woolsey).**

You see, the saddest thing about sitting in judgment is not that it is usually hypocritical, even though it is. The saddest thing about it is that when we judge others and point out their sins there is a good chance that we will obstruct the love of Christ from touching them and making them whole. We become a barrier to Christ! And I don’t know about you but the last thing I want to be is a barrier to Christ! The last thing I want to do is impede God’s love from transforming someone.

I wonder how often Christians and the church are barriers instead of vessels of Christ’s love. Some Christians talk a lot about the Day of Judgment and the doom and gloom of awful sins being judged by God. I certainly believe in the judgment and that God will judge sins. But I believe a large part of God’s judgment will be for those of us who got in the way of God’s love in Christ and therefore impeded someone from experiencing that transforming love.

Now am I minimizing sin or dismissing it. No! Am I saying that sins of crime, injustice, and abuse should not be reported and that there should be no consequences for such sins? No!

What I am saying is that it’s rarely our role as Christians to confront the sins of others without permission. I am saying we should be extremely cautious in the rare event that we feel lead to call out sin. I am saying that the bulk of Jesus’ lessons are about ways we are unkind, uncharitable, unforgiving, unloving, and unmerciful. Those are our deepest, most damaging sins. They are certainly mine and we need to correct them. Jesus said, **“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** —John 13:35

Jesus said that people will know we are his followers, not by our hatred, not by our judgments, not by our pride, not by our interpretation of scripture, but by our LOVE for one another.

You know what this means? This means that we have been released from judgment. Our job, our call, our duty, our orders are to love everyone—to reach out to the marginalized, and homosexuals have been marginalized in society. Love is the highest law! Now, let me ask you something. Can you imagine how much energy the church would save and could use for better purposes by embracing Jesus call to release judgment and love the world? Imagine all the energy that is wasted when Christians launch crusades against something.

Imagine saving that energy and using it for ministries and causes that infuse the world with the love of Jesus!

I'll tell you what I believe and this comes straight from the testimony of scripture. If the church spent as much energy taking care of the poor and widows as we do on justifying prejudice the world would be a different place. If the church spent as much time loving the least, last and lost as we do on crusades against something the world would be a different place. If the church spent as much time bringing healing and compassion to those who are suffering as we do on debating the interpretation of scripture the world would be a different place. "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Martin Thielen writes about a minister he knew who officiated at a funeral for a man who died of AIDS. He writes, "Several other pastors in town refused to handle the funeral because the man was gay and because those attending the funeral would also be gay. About thirty homosexual men showed up for the graveside funeral. The minister conducted the service the best he could. He then said the closing prayer and gave the blessing, but the men did not move. He motioned them to leave, but they wouldn't.

"Finally, the minister said, 'Is there anything more I can do for you?' One of them said, 'Yeah, they usually read the 23rd Psalm at these things. Would you mind reading it?' He did. "Then someone said, 'Isn't there something in the Bible about nothing separating us from the love of God? Can you read that?' He read Romans 8. "Then one of the men said, 'Could you read that passage about God raising us up on eagle's wings?' And he turned to Isaiah 40 and read it. This went on and on.

"These men desperately wanted to hear the word of God, to know God's love and to have spiritual connections in their lives. They were starving for God. Many of them had been raised in the church and still loved God. However, because of their sexual orientation, many Christians told them they were deviant, hated by God and unwanted at church. Harsh judgment from Christians had pushed them away from God and church."

You know what I worry about? I worry about what God thinks about his followers when their behavior pushes others away from knowing and experiencing his love and grace. I worry a lot about that.

The Bible is real clear. In 2nd Corinthians it says we are to be the aroma of Christ—the sweet fragrance of life to everyone we come across. But Jesus was even clearer. He didn't mess around with poetic language. He simply said that the world will know we follow him when we love one another. That's pretty clear, isn't it?

#### Sources:

–<http://www.kencollins.com/discipleship/disc-31.htm>

–<http://bethwoolsey.com/2013/10/3-reasons-i-quit-loving-the-sinner-and-hating-the-sin/>

–*What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* by Martin Thielen

–*Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

–*Half Truths* by Adam Hamilton

#### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is your opinion of the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin"? In what context have you heard it?
2. Was today's message helpful to you? Why or why not?
3. What is the difference between holding people accountable and judging them?
4. In the sermon, it was mentioned that Christians can become barriers to God's love rather than vessels. What does that mean for you? Can you give an example? Share an example of when you saw someone as a vessel of God's love.
5. Which sermon in this series, "Does the Bible Say That?" was the most helpful to you and why?



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097  
770-497-8215 [www.johnscreekumc.org](http://www.johnscreekumc.org)