

In my ministry I have been with families through their greatest joys and hardest tragedies. I have presided at many a wedding and a funeral and what has always been interesting to me are the things people say. First of all, I think I have to confess that in my life, I too have been guilty of saying these same phrases that we will be studying in the coming weeks. I too have not known how to respond to someone who was having a difficult time.

Today we begin a seven-week sermon series entitled: “Stick and Stones: The Things We Say.” So often we all have the best of intentions. We want to respond to people with love and compassion. That is why we throw the phrases around like “Love the sinner hate the sin, you will be in my thoughts and prayers, God won’t give you more than you can handle, God helps those who help themselves, and everything happens for a reason.”

In her book, “Everything Happens For A Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved,” Kate Bowler shares that we say these things because we want our lives to make sense. We want to feel like we are in control.

After being diagnosed with stage four colon cancer at 35, Kate found these phrases to be meaningless, so she wrote this book to give hope to others when life doesn’t make sense. She also shares helpful and biblical responses to those who are suffering.

What is interesting about our phrase from today, “Love the Sinner, hate the sin” is that it is not from the Bible. Jesus nor the Apostle Paul ever said it. It was actually a phrase from St. Augustine in a letter he wrote to a group of nuns. His sister was the head nun at the convent, and she was dealing with the issue of the other nuns giving “wanton looks” to men who would come through. The exact sentence this phrase is taken from is this: “Moreover, what I have now said in regard to abstaining from wanton looks should be carefully observed, **with due love for the persons and hatred of the sin...** (St. Augustine’s Letter 211).ⁱ

The modern rendering of the phrase comes from Mahatma Gandhi’s 1929 autobiography. He writes: [the phrase] “*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.”ⁱⁱⁱ Gandhi argues that using this phrase is an excuse to judge another person because it cannot be effectively practiced.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although many Scriptures in the Bible tell us to flee from sin and to even hate sin because of the destruction it causes, it is never helpful for us to call someone else a sinner because aren't we all sinners? Romans 3:23 tells us that "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We are all sinners in need of God's redeeming grace.

So, what do we do about this?

We take direction from Jesus Christ in our Scripture for today from Luke 10. Here we hear the parable of the Good Samaritan. A lawyer and expert of the religious law was trying to entrap Jesus and so he asked him: "What must I do to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25)? Jesus turned the question back to him and said: "What is written in the law (Luke 10:26)? The lawyer replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."^{iv}

Christ knew it was one thing to know the law and another thing to live it, so he shared the parable of the Good Samaritan. First Jesus starts his parable telling about the character "a certain man"; we are not privy to this man's social status or where he was going.^v

We hear that this man was on a dangerous stretch of road, which the audience would recognize. Commentary tells us that this road "descended nearly 3,300 feet in 17 miles...it ran through narrow passes and points, and the terrain offered easy hiding for the bandits who terrorized travelers."^{vi} Then we hear that this man was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Who would help him?

First, we hear that two religious men passed by the man in need. Commentary tells us they passed by because they were going somewhere and did not want to be diverted as touching the man to help him meant they would have to perform a ritual of cleansing.^{vii}

Then we see a Samaritan, who belonged to a group of people hated by the Jews. In fact, their warring groups could be traced all the way back to the Old Testament.^{viii} This would be a surprising twist in the story, an unexpected person responded to the need of his neighbor.

He didn't just stop to apply a bandage to the man, he took the time to bandage his wounds, carry him to a safe place, and pay for his recovery. The moral of the parable is who is my neighbor? Everyone. How do I embody the love of God? Through showing mercy.

So often our response is judgement and not mercy when we see someone different than us. We, like the Apostle Paul and even John Wesley, may be fearful of how the actions of someone else can affect us.

The person in the New Testament who warned us the most about fleeing from sin was the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul makes it clear not to associate with sinners. Even our own John Wesley had a system to deal with active sinners. He would take their ticket away needed for them to attend worship and send them to what was called a “penitential band” until their behavior improved.

Do we hear these same sentiments from Jesus? **No, because Jesus wasn’t afraid of sinners, in fact he recruited them for ministry.**

When Jesus called Peter to follow him, his response was: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). Jesus recruited Zacchaeus the sinful tax collector, by inviting himself to his house. Jesus saved the life of a woman caught in the act of adultery. He started a conversation with a Samaritan woman who was not living her best life. Jesus confronted Saul, the biggest persecuter of Christians and Jesus invited women to follow him, which at that time was unheard of.

Jesus knew we were all sinners and looked at us all the same. It is only us who look at each other different based out of fear.

The phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” has been used to keep a degree of separation between ourselves and our neighbors. Recently, I have heard this phrase used when referring to our brothers and sisters in Christ in the LGBTQI + community.

When we refer to anyone with this language, we are saying that their relationship with God is contingent upon them fitting in a box we have created for them, instead of their faith in Jesus Christ.

We cannot ever say with certainty who is a sinner and who is not, that is for God to decide. In Matthew 7 Jesus tells us “Judge not, that you be not judged...Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (selections from Matthew 7:1-5)

We should be more focused on loving people and showing them mercy, than judging them. Jesus tells us that our neighbors are everyone that we encounter and that we are called to help them no matter what, no matter who they are or what they have done or are doing.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells us that our love of God and neighbor transcends social status, economic status, and societal norms.^{ix}

Recently, I have heard this call of Jesus in our time with the crisis going on at the border. Where immigrant children have been separated from their parents, and are not being treated as humans, but as property. That is not the way we treat our neighbors. That is not the way we treat children of God.

For each of us, instead of saying “love the sinner, hate the sin” we are called to pursue relationships with those we do not understand, so we that see that God created them for a purpose.

Discipleship is about building relationships with all of God’s people so we can proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We see the Apostle Paul understood this when he said, I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”^x

We are all sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace. We are all sinners, but we have God, one another and the gift of the church so that we can flee from sin together.

The good news is that through our faith in Jesus Christ, God in God’s mercy, forgives us and offers us new life. The good news is that we do not need to waste another moment of our time deciding who is a sinner and who is not.

Instead of judgement we are called to practice accountability with one another. We are called to confess our sins before God and one another. When we have a grievance with someone, we are called to take someone with us and go talk with that person.^{xi} We are called as John Wesley said to “watch over one another in love.”^{xii}

Just as the song goes, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Just like the Samaritan who offered mercy to his neighbor, we too are called to offer mercy. Who is someone in your life that needs this mercy of Jesus Christ?

I challenge you this week to offer Christ’s mercy to those who you may feel don’t deserve it, to those you may be afraid of, to those who have hurt you or the ones you love. After all Christ told us, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

And next time when you feel the words forming on your lips “Love the sinner, hate the sin” I hope you are challenged to say God’s mercy is available to all people and how can I help?

May we be bearers of life and hope and not judgement and may we be ever careful of the way we talk about our neighbors. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://transmissionsfromexile.wordpress.com/2012/12/05/st-augustine-and-the-naughty-nuns-love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Luke 10:27

^v Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press. 1995. P. 227.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Luke/Discipleship-Looking-Our-Jesus>

^{viii} <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/the-rift-between-jews-and-samaritans/>

^{ix} Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press. 1995. P. 230.

^x 1 Corinthians 9:22b-23.

^{xi} Matthew 18:15-17.

^{xii} <https://www.seedbed.com/the-early-methodists-watched-over-one-another-in-love/>

Additional Resources

Kate Bowler. “Everything Happens For a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved. Random House. New York, NY. 2018.

<https://ethicsdaily.com/the-bible-doesnt-say-love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin-anywhere/>