

Matthew 7:1-5

Sermon Notes – Gene Ann Jimmerson

“Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin” – A sermon for FUMC Grand Junction,  
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*A couple moved to a new house. On their first morning, the wife looked out the window and observed her neighbor hanging sheets out to dry.*

*‘Those sheets are still dirty’ she said. ‘Maybe she needs a different kind of detergent. I should go and teach her how to wash them properly.’*

*Every few days, she made the same comments to her husband when her neighbor hung out her laundry on the clothesline. A month went by and one morning the wife was astounded to see that her neighbor was hanging out clean sheets.*

*She exclaimed to her husband, ‘Look, she finally learned to wash her clothes. I wonder who taught her?’*

*The husband replied, ‘Actually honey, the only difference is that I got up early this morning and washed our windows.’*

Could your windows or lenses use a little cleaning?

Today is our final sermon in this Half Truth series based on the book by Adam Hamilton. We are looking at the phrase *love the sinner hate the sin*. This phrase is not in the bible. Jesus never said these words. You may be saying, that cannot be, it must be there? If Jesus did not say it, then who did? This phrase originally appeared in 424 in St. Augustine of Hippo’s 211<sup>th</sup> letter, *Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum* which is Latin and means “with love for mankind and hatred of sins.” St. Augustine was quite the character. His letter was written to a group of nuns that were believed to be a little flirtatious and he was urging them to be chaste. There is definitely irony in St. Augustine’s plea to the nuns. In his 1929 autobiography Mahatma Ghandi restated the teaching of St. Augustine saying, “Hate the sin and not the sinner is a precept which, though easy to understand, is

rarely practiced, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world.” Think on Ghandi’s words for a few seconds.

Before we dive into unpacking what is wrong with this phrase let’s take a minute to define what sin is. The Hebrew word most often used in the Old Testament for sin is *chata* (khataw). In the New Testament the most commonly used word for sin is *hamartia*. Essentially, they both mean the same thing, “to stray from the path” or “to miss the mark” the path and mark both meaning God’s will or God’s intention for us. Sin is anything that’s action is contrary to God’s will. This means thoughts, words, actions, or non-action. If it prevents us from doing what we should or causes us to do what we should not do – that is sin. Paul states in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory.” We all sin and we are all sinners. Later in Romans 7:19 Paul tells us, “I don’t do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don’t want to do.”

Are then all sins equal? Yes and No – Yes, in the fact that all sin separates us from God’s will. Billy Graham said it this way in an on-line article: “In the Old Testament, God applied different penalties to different sins, suggesting variations in the seriousness of some sins. A thief paid restitution; an occult practitioner was cut off from Israel; one who committed adultery or cursed his parents was put to death (see Exodus, chapter 22 and Leviticus, chapter 20).”

Jesus uses prophetic hyperbole which means prophetic exaggeration or what I would say a wakeup call, “If your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell.” Matthew 5:29-30 – Jesus is not suggesting we tear out our eyes or cut off our arms he is simply telling us that - Sin is a big deal – temptation is all around you – do everything you possibly can to avoid it by resisting the things that are tempting you.

Now let’s look at the first half of our half-truth, “Love the sinner.” What’s right and what’s wrong with this part of our half-truth? The first part is actually true – Love – we are called to love, and we are called to love sinners, however, calling someone a sinner focuses on what they have

done wrong – it is judgmental. Imagine if every Sunday morning our cheerful greeters greeted each person that entered the sanctuary doors with, “Welcome, Sinner.” And as we exited Pastor Steve sent us away with, “Thank you for coming to church today, Sinner. Or be sure and come back next week, Sinner.” How long do you think it would take before our doors would close for good. While Jesus hung out with sinners. He did not call them out for their sin, he loved them by teaching them about God’s forgiveness. Those that criticized him for the company that he kept did not understand what he came to do. Jesus came to show the world how to love. 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul tells us, “This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and I’m the biggest sinner of all.’”

Jesus used neighbor language. “Neighbor” language is warm and friendly – it is inviting and inclusive. Saying come on in neighbor, says you are welcome here.

Sinner language is “us and them” language – it is judgmental – it says I see what you have done and what you will never be able to do. Sinner language says to the visitor that this is a place exclusive to the saints those that have all the answers and live life perfectly. I will never measure up nor be accepted in this place because they have it all figured out.

The Pharisees in Jesus time thought they had it all figured out. They were religious leaders that did not associate with sinners, they separated from sinners in an attempt to remain pure and holy to God. Ahh, in Jesus’ fashion he delivered this parable. Luke 18:10-14

<sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup> “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup> “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

There is true beauty in loving our neighbors and that type of love has the power to change the world.

The second half of our half-truth is the most problematic. Hate the sin, goes against the teachings of Jesus. Jesus never turned anyone away because they had a past life as a sinner – he welcomed all no matter what their present circumstances might be. He loved them with a genuine love that said you are worthy, you are welcome here, and nothing shall be withheld from you.

Paul illustrates how to live the Christian life in Romans 12:9 (NRSV): “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” Paul is telling us to be true givers of love, that it is genuine, in other words do not pretend to love. He goes on to tell us to hate what is evil, meaning, hate our own sin, hate what separates us from God. Finally, he tells us to hold on to what is good, focus on the good.

Does this mean that we should ignore the problem of sin all together? There are sins in the world that we should hate and denounce: sins that harm, oppress, or do evil to others, such as child abuse, spousal abuse, racism, injustice, and indifference to others. We should hate that there are children in this country dying of starvation. We should hate that people are victims of human trafficking. We should hate that people are victims of any type of heinous crime. However, we are commanded to love our neighbors – not judge the oppressor. The oppressor is our neighbor. The violent act or act of injustice is what we should hate, and we should do what we can to right the wrong of those injustices – all while loving our neighbors.

Most often when this half-truth is spoken, while it may have been meant with the best intentions, it is hurtful and problematic. Whether it is said in reference to a person that may be a member of the LGBTQIA+ community or an adulterer; Jesus never said turn away from those that are different, do not hang out with those sinners, turn away from those that do things you do not understand – NO, Jesus lead by example and taught us to welcome everyone no matter what, love your neighbors, love all people, keep loving because it is our job, we were commanded to love!

Being a hospital chaplain, I often hear bad theology, platitudes, phrases and misquoted Bible verses that are problematic for the setting. I have patients share with me their personal stories of sin and shame during a

time when they are most vulnerable. I do not correct them or quote the proper scripture – no, I listen, I meet them where they are, and I love them as my neighbor. Sometimes I need to stop for a minute to clean my window or adjust the lens that I see the world through. It is during those times that I ask myself, “What would Jesus say if he were here.” I am sure he would tell me, “Go and love! Do not question if they deserve your love, everybody deserves your love. Love them all no matter what. Why are you still standing here – Go and love!”

I ask you today do your windows or the lenses that you see the world through need a little cleaning. What would Jesus tell you to do?