

When God Hates the Sinner

“Our job is not to love the sinner, hate their sin, but to love the sinner and hate our sin.” (Rosaria Butterfield)



A couple of times on here I have mentioned that I do not like to communicate in cliches, especially Christian ones. The social media fad of posting memes with eight words that neatly and simplistically sum up complex political and theological topics unnerves me.

So I'm not inclined to say things like "Love the sinner, hate the sin". I'm not alone on this. Some people really do not like this phrase. But what makes this Christian cliché so unique is that people in two diametrically opposite camps have condemned it.

On one hand, there are people who feel completely ostracized by Christians and their churches. They have spoken out vehemently against this platitude because, from what I can tell, the words ring hollow and self-righteously judgmental. To them, Christians have substituted loving and humble relationship for an empty, Sunday School answer theology. The message is shouted from a distance, focused on hatred and does not square with their reality. Hating their sin is, in

essence, hating them. But I confess I am still quite ignorant in this area and I cannot fully represent other people's views.

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An Exegetical Fallacy

Yet as interesting, I have read conservative Christian scholars speak out against this phrase as well. Most notably, D. A. Carson, a professor of Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School says:

One evangelical cliché has it that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. There is a small element of truth in these words: God has nothing but hate for the sin, but this cannot be said with respect to how God sees the sinner. Nevertheless the cliché is false on the face of it, and should be abandoned. Fourteen times in the first fifty psalms alone, the psalmists state that God hates the sinner, that His wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible the wrath of God rests on both the sin (Rom. 1:18-23) and the sinner (1:24-32; 2:5; John 3:36). [1. Carson, D. A. "God's Love and God's Wrath." Bibliotheca Sacra 156 (October-December 1999): 387-398.]

Let me make note that in Carson's explanation, the point is how *God* sees the sin and the sinner. The cliché is often used to how *Christians* are supposed to react to both. I am not quite as concerned with how accurate it is in either case as much as I care about understanding and listening to people and trying to communicate with genuineness and theology that is well-developed and nuanced. The Bible explained in context—and not pithy clichés—is the only thing I think should offend

people. So its 'biblicalness' is not my focus here.

Instead I want to speak to Dr. Carson's point about God hating the sinner. I've read Psalm 5:5 and 11:5 many times over the years and I cannot get past the mention of God hating people and not merely sin. Same for Proverbs 6:19. And for Esau in Malachi and Romans. And so on.

So there must be some sense in which God hates sinners. At the same time, I don't think we can deny that God loves all sinners in that he wants relationship with them[2. 2 Peter 3:9] and gives them some measure of blessing[3. Matthew 5:45], among other nuanced definitions of love. We cannot state succinctly and unilaterally that "God hates sinners". Yet the verses in Psalms and Proverbs and about Esau have to mean something that keeps us just as honestly from saying "God doesn't hate sinners." Language is often too multi-dimensional and the Bible too often creates conflicting tensions in logic for us to try to capture this in meme or cliché form.

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Hate As Volition, Not Feeling

I think the resolution of the tension comes from understanding that 'hate' in both the OT and the NT means that God 'rejects in relationship'. Covenant relationship with God is a relational standing, like marriage[4. The parallels are so deep, the Hebrew word for 'hate' in Malachi has 'divorce' in its semantic range.]. God wants relationship with everyone, but he only welcomes those in who are humble enough to receive Him by grace instead of trying to earn it by works, intelligence or philosophy. God still pursues and God still blesses but unless a person comes with the humility of a

child, God rejects. In that sense, he 'hates'.

Which brings me to my point. In Amos 6:8, God says, "*I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds...*" The book of Amos was written in part to express the idea that God hates pride from all peoples and will execute judgment impartially. Because pride prevents the relationship. Yet even his own people in covenant were still guilty of it. It is here that God does love the sinner and hate the sin. But to be like God, we must hate ours as well.

I'm So Humbled By How Great I Am

All the time on social media I see Christians brag on their accomplishments. From education to fitness to sports to serving the poor. I suppose there is something detached from reality about it on the internet that we feel comfortable doing it. I once noticed a comment from a professing Christ follower on my wife's Facebook that said she had lost X amount of weight and that she was "so proud of herself".

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If the same person had put on Facebook that she left a child in a hot car, the reaction would have been swift and harsh. Instead, people liked the status and praised her. Let me be clear: God hates pride as much as he does the worst things humans are capable of. God finds human pride as gross, disgusting and reprehensible as the worst human acts of evil imaginable, including abuse and murder. How easily we hate the acts of terrorists who shed innocent blood yet sit in comfortable community with those with proud eyes who create disunity in churches! God absolutely hates both[5. Proverbs 6:16-19].

I confess I have used social media to pridefully promote myself so I'm not casting stones here. But make no mistake, Amos 6 tells us clearly that Israel had puffed herself up due to her accomplishments and feelings of superiority over others. And God expressed passionately that he hated it. He still does. God clearly says, *"Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth"* and teaches, *"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do, to be honored by others. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret."* Yet social media is often a breeding ground for violating these verses. Often in clever, proud-of-my-humility ways.

Why He Must Increase and We Decrease

I do not think biblically it is wrong for a Christian to ever talk about what they have accomplished. But there must be a full and significant expression of praise to God along with it. This is not something to be done for show; God says in Amos 5:21 that he hates that too. He alone truly knows the difference. He knows if it comes from a heart that understands what John the Baptist meant when he said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from Heaven." But before others, we must be satisfied with our good deeds being private, or else exalt God far more than the accomplishment. God will not share his glory with another. And he hates it when we try.

I'll close with something written by Isaac Watts over 300 years ago that we desperately need to meditate on today:

*Now for the loss I bear his name
What was my gain I count my loss
My former pride I call my shame
And nail my glory to His cross*

The best obedience of my hands

*Dares not appear before Thy throne;
But faith can answer Thy demands,
By pleading what my Lord has done.*

*No more my God
I boast no more*