



Half Truths

Week 2: “Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin.”

Brian Mattson - 09/14/2025

Last week, we began our series, Half Truths, by looking a little closer at the phrase *God said it, I believe it, that settles it*. We talked about the truth that we all interpret scripture differently, from our own perspectives, and that’s okay. We don’t have to come to the same conclusions on every verse and chapter of the Bible. In fact, John Wesley even used the phrase *think and let think* for how we are to treat differing opinions that don’t chip away at our foundational beliefs.

And more importantly, our own theology can change and expand when we do a little interpreting together. It is actually good and healthy for us to read scripture, study the Bible, and discuss our views and opinions—especially differing ones—together.

This week we turn to a phrase I’ve heard a lot over the years. *Love the sinner, hate the sin*. Have you heard that one? It seems reasonable, and even like something Jesus might say. But if we dig a little deeper, we’ll uncover some ways this phrase does more harm than good. And it all begins with: Football.

A lot of you know that I am a proud University of Missouri alumnus. Back in 2013, we had a pretty great football team. The season started with the normal excitement. We weren't supposed to be anything great, but the team gained steam, rattling off wins in their first seven games. After a loss, the winning trend continued, and they moved all the way up the rankings to

number five before losing in the SEC Championship Game to Auburn, but then won their Cotton Bowl game against Oklahoma State and finished the season ranked fifth. It was a lot of fun to follow, and one of the best stories of the season was about the meteoric rise of senior defensive end, Michael Sam.

He played a minor role in his junior season, but during his final year, he was a monster on the football field. He recorded 11.5 sacks, leading the SEC and tying a Mizzou record. Following the season, he was named co-defensive player of the year in his conference, a first team All-SEC player, and a first team All-American. Things were looking really good that he was going to make some money in the NFL draft that April, but something made a lot of news in February. It was a secret that only his coaches and teammates knew about, and one they had been quiet about the entire season. Michael Sam was gay.

It was a big deal, if you recall. It was all over social media, plastered on TV news, and written about in the New York Times. He was projected to be drafted by a professional NFL team that spring, anywhere from the 3rd to the 7th round, but this news meant he was more than just another draft pick. He would be the first openly gay player to be drafted.

Of course there were some who thought NFL teams didn't want to, or couldn't, handle the media circus that was following Sam. Some people didn't think the world could handle having a gay football player. There were—and are—some folks who don't or won't accept gay people, no matter what their line of work, but for sure we cannot have gay people play football.

There was also a secondary story. About how Michael Sam's teammates rallied around him, kept his secret until he was ready, and continued to be a family of football. Somehow a group of more than 60 college kids kept this secret for *months*, which is still unbelievable to me. When news broke though, the quarterback of the team, James Franklin, sent a tweet out. It

simply said, *love the sinner, hate the sin*. And I remember thinking at the time, *Ok, we might see things differently, but that seems harmless*. But as Adam Hamilton puts it in his book, it's pretty hard to hate someone else's sin *without* harming the sinner.

So to really unpack this catchphrase, first we need to understand just exactly what sin is. In the Old and New Testaments, the words translated as *sin* essentially mean "to stray from the path" or "to miss the mark." And in Christian terms, the path or the mark are God's intention or will for us. Adam Hamilton writes:

So, sin can apply to any thought, word, or action that is contrary to God's will. It can even apply to a failure to act or do something we should do.

- Adam Hamilton

Our thoughts, words, and actions—even our inaction—can draw us from God's will for our lives. We all sin and miss the mark, generally every day, which is important for us to remember. We. All. Sin. So, if we are *all* sinners, does that mean all sins are equal in God's eyes? I don't think that's the case. Let's suppose you are cheating the other players in the role of the banker during a game of Monopoly. Does that hold the same degree of consequences as embezzling money or cheating your taxes? What about someone who consumes too many unhealthy foods, like donuts or bagels? (Besides just on Sundays—that doesn't count.) Is that the same as someone who abuses drugs or alcohol regularly?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says things like, "You have heard it said to those who lived long ago, Don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment." It sounds a little like Jesus is equating all sins—a sin is a sin. But Hamilton contends that Jesus is "engaging in what some call 'prophetic hyperbole.'" He believes Jesus is

exaggerating his examples to make a point: sin, all sin, is seriously detrimental to our lives and God's will for us.

I don't believe Jesus really wants us to pluck out our eyes if they cause us to sin or to cut off our hands. Jesus makes his points with *prophetic hyperbole*. So, yes, we all sin, and sin is bad, but some sins carry more weight than others. Let's just try to do our best not to sin, deal?

Now, the first part of our half truth—Love the Sinner—is actually true! Good news! But did Jesus actually say that? No. He said, "Love your neighbor." And who is our neighbor? Everyone we meet. Yes, Jesus loved sinners because he loved everyone.

We, too, are called to love everyone. Even those we haven't met yet or will never meet. Our neighbors are people who need our help. Our fellow humans who are imprinted with the Image of God—the *Imago Dei*. It doesn't mean you have to know them personally or feel something for them. It means collecting food for Rare Breed or supplies for McGregor Elementary. Our kindness and compassion should know no bounds. Jesus even tells us that our kindness and compassion belong to our enemies as well. Sometimes, don't you just want to tell Jesus to quit talking? I can love my family, my friends, neighbors... but enemies? C'mon.

But Hamilton says, "When we return blessings for evil, we create possibilities for transformed situations and relationships." These are the ways the world changes for the good.

So why doesn't Jesus say to love the sinner if we are to love our neighbors *and* our enemies? Loving our neighbors covers everyone; our enemies and sinners. Instead, a command to love the *sinner* instead of loving our *neighbor* means that we start looking at people as sinners, which naturally leads to a position of judgment. That one-word change to "sinner" encourages us to look at what is wrong with the people around us. To dissect each other's lives, highlight the places we see one another falling short. Then—maybe

without intending to—we can begin to see our connections and relationships as something we attend to in spite of one another's failures. *Oh, I know you are a sinner, but I'm going to love you through it.* Rather, Jesus desires for us to simply love one another. No caveats. To love each other without focusing on each other's sins and shortcomings, and to work on fixing our own faults along the way. Adam Hamilton says this:

When “Love the sinner” is our mantra, we’ve put ourselves in a position of seeing others as sinners rather than neighbors, and though we may emphasize that we also are sinners, our focus on the other as sinner rather than as neighbor defines our relationship.

- Adam Hamilton

Luke's introduction to the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector begins, “Jesus told the parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust.” That introduction sounds like people who were already looking at others as sinners instead of neighbors. Religious people who had already decided who was right and wrong, sinner or saint. I've been guilty of making my mind up about people before I really knew them. We all have. But we are not called to judge. We are called to love.

Back at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to steer clear of judging people.

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the

speck out of your neighbor's eye.

- Matthew 7:1-5

Whenever we judge people, we become hypocrites, and we all know that hypocritical tendencies drive people away. It's generally the number one reason why people leave the church or distrust Christians. So perhaps we can rewrite the first part of this half truth like this: *I will love my neighbor despite the fact that I am a sinner. I love because God loved me first.*

Now let's look at the second part of the phrase—hate the sin. We've laid out that sin is not God's preferred direction for our lives. Sin is also serious and has real consequences. In the gospels, Jesus spends a lot of his time associating and befriending people society considered sinners. He traveled and ate with prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers, drunks, and thieves. He never told them he loved them, but hated their sins. He did routinely speak of God's forgiveness. He described God's character being like a father who always welcomes us home.

In fact, the times Jesus got most upset about sins were with the religious leaders. He flipped tables in the temple as money changers were making profits. That's when his fury was the greatest. And there are times when his disgust at the Pharisees' hypocrisy was truly fierce.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

- Matthew 23:27-28

Those are just a couple of verses in a long chapter of Jesus dressing down the religious elite. It's not a happy chapter. And it takes some reflection to make sure that we don't become like those Pharisees who thought they had it all

figured out. Like we have all the answers and everyone else is a sinner, and we hate sin. As if we aren't all sinners.

That doesn't mean we are to be silent about sin. As I said, sin is real and has very real consequences. I believe we are most definitely called to use voices and actions to address our collective human sins and tendencies. Child abuse. Racism. Injustice. Greed. Indifference to our fellow humans. These are sins that harm and inflict evil on others. These are sins we need to call out and denounce together.

Is it our role to point out each other's individual sins, though, like some sort of scarlet letter? Paul has quite a few words on the subject of individual sin in Romans 2 - but it's a charge for each of us to work with the Holy Spirit in our own lives to confront this kind of individual sin. It is interior work. Paul warns us about the dangers of trying to do that work for someone else from the outside.

“Every time you criticize [judge] someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one. Judgmental criticism of others is a well-known way of escaping detection in your own crimes and misdemeanors.”

- Romans 2:1-2 MSG

God wants to deal with sin, yes. Even individual sins, but it is individual work. And, if we will meet God in it with humility to deal with ourselves, it is love and grace-filled work. Paul concludes this particular discussion of sin with these words,

“Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

- Romans 2:4

In Adam Hamilton's book, he goes on to talk about this half truth—*Love the sinner, hate the sin*—as most prominent in the discussion around human sexuality and homosexuality. As I mentioned last week, interpretation is

necessary when we read scripture. I've read the verses people use to characterize *others* as outside the will of God. I think these verses need to be studied, reflected upon, and carefully interpreted. If you personally struggle with how to think about these verses and still be a Christian, I'm happy to have further discussions. Please, email me sometime and we can sit down and talk. But, especially in light of the news this week, I want to finish this sermon by asking you to quit using this half-truth. Love the sinner, hate the sin is not a way of life. It's not good for other people to hear, and it's certainly not healthy for any of us to embody.

Because what it's doing is drawing lines. It's lifting ourselves onto pedestals of our own creation and dragging others into a place of sin; of judgment. And as the days and weeks go by, this pattern gets worse, and the phrase starts to mutate. We're fallible humans. Soon enough, we stop thinking *Love the sinner, hate the sin*. Perhaps even just unconsciously we start thinking *Hate the sinner because of the sin*. We begin compounding and doubling down on the harmful rhetoric.

America has a hate issue. I have it. You have it. We all have it. We are all sinners. But the moment we start thinking we aren't sinners is when we start to put other people in boxes. We retreat to our corners and declare that the war is on. Us against them. And that is scary. These are scary times. My wife is a school teacher. I have little kids in school. I have friends who are politically active. I have friends that take mass transportation. Violence—and specifically gun violence—is an affront to God's will. I will say that forever.

We have got to come together to figure this out. It's not *just* an American problem, but we sure take the lion's share of it.

I heard a quote from former New Jersey governor, Chris Christie, last week. And it's about the importance of coming together, in close proximity to one another. Not behind screens. Not in the places where we are comfortable

and the people agree with us. Because it's harder to hate up close. Here's what he said:

"It's harder to hate up close... So the purpose of spending this time together is it becomes harder to hate up close. We realize we're all human beings. We all have our strengths and our weaknesses. We all have our insecurities. We all have our great successes and our disappointments, and as we get to know each other, it becomes harder, then, to yell and scream at each other. It becomes a lot harder to storm away."

Here's the thing: when we walk away, it's harder to see Image of God in other people. It's easy to let our anger, our differences, cloud our vision. People get fuzzy and blurry the further away we drift. We soon forget they are people. Instead, they become sinners. Don't let that happen. Be on constant guard against this hardening of your heart. Love—love for the totality of every human on the planet—should always be our defining characteristic, because love is from God.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

- 1 John 4:7