

As a Christian, you may remember this often-used slogan for thinking about relationships: “*love the sinner, hate the sin.*” Haven’t you yourself heard that quite a bit? And it’s really pretty tidy, isn’t it: *love the sinner, hate the sin.* Well, my experience and my observations are that this saying is one of the *easiest* pieces of advice to *give* and one of the *hardest* pieces of advice to *receive and then actually execute.*

Take the case of an underprivileged young 20-something who really, truly faced a lot of hardships growing up—perhaps poverty, lack of opportunity, deep family dysfunction. The hand this young person was dealt just seems really unfair. And when this person steals some items from a convenience store, it’s pretty easy to say *love the sinner, hate the sin.*

But what if this same young person sexually assaults your eight-year-old son or daughter? *Love the sinner, hate the sin.* Hey, that rolls off your tongue with the same easy-come, easy-go flow, right? After all, we’re all sinners. As for the heinous sin against your child, fuhgeddaboutit—love that sinner! Yeah, right...But of course, this very idea is what sets faith in Christ so far apart from every religion. Yes, Christ commands us to love others—with no conditions! Let’s take a deeper look at that.

Hey, in God’s ultimate economy, there are really just two types of people, those who receive and believe in Christ—they are His children—and then there are those who are *not* believers...at least *not yet.*

Here’s the interesting part: does God command us to love unbelievers or to simply love fellow Christians? You know the answer to that is *both!* As to unbelievers, Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is that “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39b) And, of course, *everyone* is our neighbor. But, c’mon now, you and I have been around the block, we’ve seen just enough of life to know what Jesus was really thinking: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself, *except when that neighbor commits a really heinous sin, like sexually assaulting your son or daughter.*” A hard saying...

And all that’s true for believers loving believers too. Jesus taught this directly to His disciples: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35) But wait. C’mon now, we’ve all put up with that self-righteous, fault-finding deacon for years—God surely didn’t mean that we have to really love him, right? Well, ‘fraid so.

Likewise, Paul taught the Galatians (in 3:28) that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Every member of the body of Christ is to be the focus and recipient of our love. So, it’s all about loving believers...and unbelievers!

But it’s even deeper than that: Paul instructed Timothy that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people...This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2: 1,3) We are not only to love all people but *to give thanks to God for those scoundrels.* And Paul indicates there’s an eternal purpose of all this lovin’ by Christians—*that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth!*

And then here’s this short and sweet Jesus-teaching that turns our deepest inclinations inside out: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” (Matt 5: 43-44) Now we have the whole picture. God commands us to love both unbelievers and believers, friends and enemies. And He did not put any conditions on the worthiness of the recipients of our love. Or the lack of worthiness. Yes, love the sinner.

Applying all that with “hating the sin” is a bit less often quoted. Jude 22-23 says “...have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.” And James also is very vigilant in this area—he gets very personal—first instructing us that “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then

desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” (1:15) Then James tells us to “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls...” (1:21) and then he says “to keep [ourselves] unstained from the world.” (1:27) Of course, here James challenges us with the real issue: the most difficult path is to hate and avoid the sins resulting from *our own* intimate desires, not just hate the sins of others...you know, like murder or sexual assault. How is following James’ counsel working for you?

So, *love the sinner and hate the sin*. And, of course, it’s much easier to *counsel others* in this direction than to apply it to our own situation—you know, focusing on a messiness in our lives we have acquiesced to.

Let’s talk about this in the context of modern businesses and nonprofits. Here’s the deal. In our current era, at least in America, the personal has become very politicalized—from every political viewpoint. If *you* don’t subscribe to *my* views on ethnicity, sexuality, gender, perceived social heritage, and so much more, well, then, you are fair game for *us* to cancel *you* right out of social media and schools and employment and career. Better yet, we don’t even have to know you—your physical attributes and maybe a few other characteristics are sufficient to know you need to be canceled out of hiring opportunities, promotions, or choice assignments. “Bullying” used to be a word commonly disparaged by pretty much everyone. Not so much anymore—currently, actual acts of bullying supposedly reveal enlightened values, self-righteously and group-righteously invoked against people-groups not in favor, or at least not with *your* point of view. That’s right: no need to research whether a specific, real sin was identifiably committed against a specific victim...instead, simply tag that person as being in the “wrong” group and take punitive action.

Wish I could say that all this damaging condemnation is limited to unbelievers. But it’s been going on, oh, for at least a couple of thousand years—including by God’s people. A candidate for the all-time gold medal for this, was...by his own account...the Apostle Paul. You see, Paul, also known as Saul, persecuted Christians deeply, from approvingly attending the stoning murder of Stephen to throwing women and children in prison. When Paul converted, Christians were shocked. But you know what these early Christians ultimately did: Paul was embraced as one of their own! That action is pretty much straight from God’s playbook—love the sinner but hate the sin committed. But what about the track record of so many Christians in the centuries since? Sadly, even while many Christians truly love their neighbors, other Christians are often far removed from Jesus’s example of hanging out with the “undesirables.” When today’s cancel culture cancels someone, aren’t they really just mimicking the example of some Christians?

Also wish I could say that America’s institutions are taking a stand against hateful activity, you know, institutions like governments, corporations, universities, and schools. But, no, nowadays these institutions are very often actually leading the charge in installing brand-new or freshly-revised versions of hate-based “isms.” OK, so modern-day Americans are not going to be burned at the stake, at least not yet! But you do know that Christians even persecuted fellow Christians in past centuries, all the way down to burning them at the stake—like for merely translating the Bible into the English language or just not *believing correctly*. Then *and now*, it’s often people supposedly sharing the same worldview who shred each other!

So, how about a specific scenario? Just what do you do when your coworker or your friend or your daughter or even you are sidelined, restricted from career-advancement due to some version of sexism or genderism or racism, yeah, some “ism” that’s pushing either one direction or another? Hard. Very hard. Still, are we working to fulfill the heights of love Jesus asks of us, loving the sinner and hating the sin? Hey, are you still with me on this? Well, how’re you going to do that? What’s your Christlike solution?

Yeah, just how *do* we fulfill the heights of following Jesus, loving the sinner and hating the sin? Here are three more “wish I could says.” Wish I could say it’s not gonna happen to you. Wish I could say your leaders will thwart it. Wish I could say that we’ll always respond well when it comes our way. Still, Jesus commanded us with that prescription—taking the sometimes-bittersweet medicine of loving others!

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Let's face it—even battles among Christians can and often do get a bit nasty, perhaps because a strong measure of self-righteousness can easily set in. Same with workplaces, even when you are bonded relatively closely to your coworkers. Share the specific tactics that you use to address, defuse, handle, and heal such situations.
  
2. How do you personally handle the feels-like-nearly-impossible commandment to love your enemies? Be specific.
  
3. There is no justifiable reason for followers of Jesus to fall into the deadly trap of perpetrating the condemnation that comes from weaponizing “-isms,” past or present. Have you been or are you in an organization bent in that direction? Discuss...if it's wise to do so in your study group!