

ON A COMMON SAYING

Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

A saying that isn't there — and the harder thing the gospel actually asks

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
Free for congregational use · larryherzogjr.com

Adapted from What Horse? Common Misconceptions About What the Bible Actually Says, chapter 16.

“Remember: love the sinner, hate the sin. That’s what Jesus taught us. We can disapprove of what someone does while still loving them as people.”

That is roughly how the line lands in a thousand conversations — a podcast, a small group, a text thread about the headlines. It has the ring of Scripture. It carries the prestige of something Jesus said. It is offered, and received, as the settled Christian verdict on how to relate to people whose lives we morally disapprove of.

It is not in the Bible.

Unlike some of the other lines Christians attribute to Scripture, this one at least has a substantial heritage. Augustine, writing to a community of nuns in the early fifth century, put it as *cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum* — *with love for the people and hatred of the vices*. He was giving pastoral counsel inside a community, to sisters who knew one another by name, about how to bear with one another when someone’s conduct had become harmful. Twelve centuries later, after passing through various restatements, something close to the modern English form surfaced in the 1929 autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi — a Hindu, influenced by Christianity but not a Christian — who wrote that one ought to *hate the sin and not the sinner*. For him it was a counsel of non-violence toward political opponents in the long struggle for Indian independence.

From those two sources — a fifth-century African bishop and a twentieth-century Indian Hindu — the saying entered the modern American Christian vocabulary, and by the late twentieth century it had become one of the most-deployed phrases in our moral debates over sexuality, marriage, and behavior the speaker disapproves of. In that register it functions as a clean theological formula: *you do something I think is wrong; I disapprove of what you do; but I love you as a person*. A tidy two-step. The speaker keeps his moral judgment and his sense of Christian charity, both at once, in a single sentence.

The argument here is not that the saying is simply false. It gestures at something the Christian tradition really does affirm — God loved sinners while they were sinning; sin is a real thing to be opposed. The trouble is that it says this in a form that has, in popular use, wandered a long way from anything Augustine or the New Testament had in mind. The saying offers a formula. The gospel offers something harder, more costly, and finally more honest.

Whom the Bible calls the sinner

The Bible does teach that God loves sinners, and that God hates sin. It does not, however, hand us the saying as a formula for sorting other people. Scripture’s teaching on love and sin runs in a different direction entirely.

Start with where it places the believer. Not as a lover standing over against other sinners, but as a sinner himself — the leading example.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. — Romans 5:6–8

Paul does not say *Christ died for the ungodly, so love the ungodly while hating their ungodliness*. He says *Christ died for the ungodly, and we ourselves are the ungodly*. The Christian's first reference to "sinners" is not a category over there to which he relates as a benefactor. It is the company he was born into, the company Christ entered while we were still in it. The popular saying treats *the sinner* as a third party to be loved from the outside. The gospel treats *the sinner* as us.

Jesus made the point more sharply in the temple, in the two men who went up to pray.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."... But the tax collector, standing far off... beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" — Luke 18:11–13

The Pharisee has located "sinners" outside himself — *extortioners, unjust, adulterers, this tax collector*. He sees them clearly. He distinguishes himself from them. In the very structure of his prayer he loves them in the abstract, by assigning them a category separate from his own. With a slight rewording he could have said *I love the sinner, but I hate the sin*. He goes home unjustified.

The tax collector addresses no other sinner. He addresses God about his own sin — *God, be merciful to me, a sinner*. He is the one Jesus declares justified. His structure — *me, a sinner* — is the one the gospel asks every Christian to inhabit. The saying's structure — *them, the sinners* — is the Pharisee's.

And when Scripture does turn to the practical question of what to do about another believer's sin, it does not reach for a slogan:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. — Galatians 6:1–2

The transgression is named honestly. The response is *restoration*, not a formula. And the believer is warned to watch himself — *lest you too be tempted* — because the frame is *bear one another's burdens*, not evaluate them from a safe distance. This is concrete, costly, integrated work that begins with the believer's awareness of his own susceptibility to the very same sin.

What the saying displaces

It would be a small thing to write about a saying only to correct its attribution. In popular use, *love the sinner, hate the sin* is not the problem. It is the doorway into the problem — because of what it quietly displaces.

It externalizes sin. By its grammar, the saying puts *the sinner* outside the speaker. The speaker is the lover; the other is the sinner. That is the precise inversion of the believer's posture in Scripture and in the liturgy, where he confesses himself *a poor, miserable sinner* every Sunday. His first relationship to *the sinner* is recognition, not classification. The saying lets him stand outside the category the Bible puts him squarely inside.

It makes the line between person and sin too clean. The saying assumes sin is something a person *does* or *has*, like a coat that can be hated while the wearer is loved. But the Lutheran confession of *simul iustus et peccator* — the Christian as at once righteous and sinner — names something the saying cannot hold. Sin is not a layer on top of the person; until Christ finishes his deeper work, it is the orientation of the whole person. To say *I love you but hate your sin* is, strictly, to say *I love the part of you that is in Christ and hate the part that is in Adam* — a distinction the believer can barely make about himself, let alone make from the outside about someone else.

It offers a formula in place of a relationship. The saying lets a Christian file his ethical position in one sentence and move on: he loves the person, he hates the sin, his homework is done. But Christ did not love sinners by deploying a formula about us. He ate with us, walked with us, wept with us, bore with us, died for us. The saying offers a slogan; the gospel asks for a life. A Christian who has the line memorized but knows no names is not following the One the line is supposed to represent.

It makes it easier to avoid the very people we claim to love. *I love the sinner, hate the sin* is most often spoken about people the speaker does not personally know — sinners in the abstract, over there, in the headlines, in the category. The neighbor whose life we know in detail never gets talked about this way; we know him too well. The saying performs charity where charity has not been performed, substituting a verbal acknowledgment for the labor of being present in a life. And the neighbor can tell the difference. He knows when he is being engaged and when he is being categorized.

And it loses the gospel's own use of the phrase. Taken strictly, the line describes how God deals with *us*. The whole New Testament is the story of God doing both at once, in Christ — absorbing the sin into himself on the cross while pouring out his love on the sinners who put him there. The saying becomes true, and beautiful, only when the *sinner* in it is the speaker: *God loved me while I was a sinner. God hated my sin enough to kill it in his Son's body.*

That is what the saying could say, if we let it. Popular use has not let it. We have made the saying about other people. The gospel made it about us.

The catechism's harder word

The Small Catechism has been doing the harder thing for five centuries. Its word on how we deal with the sins of others is the Fifth Petition — and it begins, characteristically, with our own:

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins... for we daily sin much, and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. So will we, on the other hand, also heartily forgive and willingly do good to those who sin against us.

We daily sin much. Not a moment of devotional humility to be observed before returning to our usual evaluation of everyone else, but the steady-state Christian condition. The believer who prays the Lord's Prayer commits, every time, to naming his own sin first. And then — *on the other hand* — he *heartily forgives and willingly does good* to those who have sinned against him. The forgiveness is real. The good is concrete, extended to the sister who has hurt him, the parent who has failed him, the colleague who has wronged him, in the ordinary daily traffic of his callings.

That is the whole of it. It begins with the Christian's own sin. It commits him to active forgiveness. It locates love in real relationships rather than in formulas. Set beside it, the saying has mostly been a way to register a position without doing any of that work.

There is a hymn stanza that prays for exactly this restraint — the willingness to speak when we must, and the humility to guard the tongue when the words would only serve ourselves:

Keep me from saying words That later need recalling; Guard me, lest idle speech May from my lips be falling; But when, within my place, I must and ought to speak, Then to my words give grace, Lest I offend the weak.

— Johann Heermann, 1630

That is the better prayer to carry into the next hard conversation. Not a formula held out at arm's length toward a stranger, but a plea that the words we do speak — to the neighbor we actually know — would come with grace, from a heart that has confessed itself the sinner first.