

## Faithful Responses to Common Christian Cliches: “Love the Sinner; Hate the Sin”

### Part One: The Background and Origin of the Cliche

The modern version was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi in his 1929 biography, where he wrote, “Hate the sin, but not the sinner.”

The ancient version comes from a letter by Saint Augustine, *Letter 211* (423AD). The opening line to the letter: “As severity is ready to punish the faults which it may discover, so charity is reluctant to discover the faults which it must punish.”

- ❖ The letter is a rebuke of nuns of a monastery in which his sister had been prioress. It seems the sisters were dissatisfied with her replacement, and Augustine writes to lay down a few rules.
- ❖ In so doing, he focuses on the conduct of the sisters when outside of the convent. He writes at length on *gazing too long upon a man*. He says, “if you perceive in any one of your number this forwardness of eye, warn her at once, so that the evil which has begun may not go on, but be checked immediately.” Clearly, Augustine is encouraging not only personal chaste behavior but also rebuke of outward, public sin of another.
- ❖ As he develops this line, he talks about the importance of making known the sin of the guilty sister. He says, “that you are not guiltless if by keeping silence you allow sisters to perish, whom you may correct by giving information of their faults.”
- ❖ The point: the rebuke should not be done cruelly, but mercifully, to protect the *very many from perishing through infection of the plague* with which one has been stricken. There is concern that not saying something would lead to others doing the same offense.
- ❖ Now for the quote: “Moreover, what I have now said in regard to abstaining from wanton looks should be carefully observed, *with due love for the persons and hatred of the sin*, in observing, forbidding, reporting, proving, and punishing all other faults.”

The whole point is that Augustine would want sin rebuked and corrected because he cared for the people under his charge.

### Part Two: How the Cliche Gets Used Today

In the modern age, people who employ this cliche actually seek the *exact opposite*. In saying they hate the sin, they acknowledge a behavior that might be “problematic” (living in sin, fornication, homosexuality are typical scenarios), but by invoking the so-called “love for the sinner,” they seek to take themselves off the hook, resulting in not saying anything about the sin. IOW, I’ve never seen it this way– “I love you so much that I must say something about your wicked behavior.” It’s always the opposite.

This cliche is a way people rationalize unrepentant sin, and in particular, avoid their responsibility in calling for repentance (a leaving off of sin, a sorrow for it, and a turn to Christ for His mercy). It’s commonly used when referring to people within the sphere of the Christian

(and not the neighbor down the street they have no interaction with). Imagine if Jesus operated this way! “Hey Zaccheaus! It’s cool! Keep bilking the poor! You gotta live your truth. Who am I to say anything to you? I love you too much to call you out.”

Instead, exempted by the cliché, people caught in sin are left to wallow in it, so grandma can have over their grandson and live-in girlfriend for Thanksgiving in “good conscience,” for while she condemns their living arrangement, she desperately loves the sinner (and doesn’t really hate the sin all that much). “I don’t approve of it, but what can you do? Hate the sin, love the sinner.”

### **Part Three: Points for Discussion**

1. What does it mean *to love someone*? If you love them, don’t you warn them that what they’re doing is harmful to them and others? That if they don’t leave off with unrepentant sin, that it could jeopardize their standing with God?

2. What does it mean to *hate sin*? St. Paul in Romans 7:15-25:

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, *but I do the very thing I hate*. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but *sin that dwells within me*. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, *but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing*. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Paul is sharing an “existential crisis,” driven to the cross of Jesus. This is hating his own sin, but is a model for how we all should regard sin in ourselves and those we love. There are a myriad of examples where Paul confronts people he loves in their sin, or expresses regret that they’ve strayed and calls for action. 1 Corinthians 5? Or what does it mean, for instance, that Paul “handed over [Hymenaeus and Alexander] to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme”? Was it that they would repent? How would they learn? There are many places where Jesus models this. Firm, direct, loving, incisive. John 4, and the Samaritan woman?

*Modern context:* do we even really hate sin? Or are we so comfortable with sin that to say “I hate sin” is paying lip service? What should hating sin drive us toward? What should hating sin actually look like?

### 3. What is a *proper* application of this principle?

The best Christian relationships we can have are people willing to tell us the truth (both in the moment and throughout our lives). It might be uncomfortable, but the people we value the most (whether it be spouses or mentors in the faith) are the ones who love us to confront sin and call for us to leave off with it and repent. Small and big sins.

On the other hand, we are to be salt and light, seeking to restore the Christian in *a spirit of gentleness*. This means we love the person to tell the truth, but *not in such a way that would drive them from the relationship*. For instance, confronting a family member at the table at Thanksgiving dinner might not be the best approach! But a private conversation where admonition is given in a winsome way can be quite effective...and what Christians are to do.

### 4. Why is this cliché so commonly invoked?

At the root of so many clichés is the sinful inclination to avoid repenting/calling for repentance, a fear of being seen as judgmental, and having uncomfortable conversations. This one is no different.

It's also a way to rationalize behavior without actually addressing the sin. For instance, the cliché is invoked often when using circumlocutions and softer terms ("My grandson is living an alternative lifestyle"; "My daughter is experimenting at college"; "My nephew is sowing his wild oats"). The cliché can take the Christian "off the hook" from having to actually confront the specific mortal sin.

American Christians tend to see immoral behavior strictly in terms of "personal choices" that have no effect on anyone else. We are way more sensitive about "getting into someone's business" than we are in condemning an open, public, activity.

### 5. How do we love the "weaker" Christian?

Sometimes, people who are sinning are immature in the faith and need reproof or further explanation of a teaching. Perhaps they haven't thought things through or are going along with what everyone else around them is doing. Mature Christians are compelled to intervene with a) a rebuke b) the clear teaching and c) the forgiveness of Jesus.

Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 8 is along this line:

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ

died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

The point: sometimes the weaker brother continues to engage in a former (sinful) practice...and when we don't say something or even worse, seeming to condone it (eating in an idol's temple), this weak person may be destroyed. In not saying something, Paul says that you sin against the brother and *against Christ*.

In the end, people end up *tolerating the sin, and hating the sinner* because we leave them to wallow in ignorance or unrepentance. Many consciences are seared.

Finally, when St. Paul lists open, egregious sins, like he does in Galatians 5 and 1 Cor 6, he connects them with a loss of salvation. However, he says, "And such were some of you..." meaning that people left off with those sins and repented, having been washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God. So, if we hate the sin, and truly love the sinner, we are duty-bound to invoke their calling as Christians, and warn them to leave off with sin...for their eternal good.

To say nothing is not an option for a Christian.