

Half Truths

Love the Sinner Hate the Sin?

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

So my mom is a sinner, but I love her anyway. Now, I discovered my mom was a sinner. It all happened because of school picture day. I was in second or third grade, and it was school picture day. And I had a dentist appointment early that morning, and I went to the dentist. I had some dental work done, and they numbed part of my face. They finished up and my mom dropped me off at school and before I got out of the car, I gave her a big smile and said, Mom, how does my face look?

Does it look okay? And she said, It looks perfect. You are beautiful. Now, it wasn't until a few weeks later, when the teacher handed out the packet of pictures, I realized my mom's sin. Now, you know that dreaded moment when you get your school pictures back. It's. It's that moment, right? It's like that is one shot that you have to get it to get it right.

And then you cut up those little wallet-size photos, and you trade them with your friends. So, just to give you a reference here, here's a picture of me from a few years before this cute little smile on my dog, Duke. So here's just a reference to my full-face smile. A few years before the incident happened.

So. Okay, back to picture day. Picture handout day. The teacher handed me the packet of pictures, and I flipped it over. And in that little plastic window was this picture. My mom lied to me, and lying is a sin. Even one of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:16 says no lies about your neighbor. Do not bear false witness. We say.

Now, she wasn't all wrong because I was beautiful in that picture. God created me in his image, just like he created all of you. And my mom is one of the most beautiful people I know, inside and outside. And I can't imagine, actually, in real life, introducing her as this is my mom. She's a sinner. But I love her anyway, or this is my husband, or these are my sons.

They are sinners, but I still love them because Romans chapter three says We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Now, the sins of my mom, you know, pale in comparison to the sins of some of the other people in this world. Like we know that. We know that there are people who have done these awful acts.

You think about these big things that are happening in our world right now: the war in Israel, the war in Ukraine, even the violence within our own country and in our half — truth for today. The last one in this sermon series is the half-truth. Love the sinner, hate the sin. So we think about it. Did Jesus ever say love the sinner?

And the answer is no, not really. But it seems like something that Jesus would say: Of course, we're supposed to love one another. So think about the time when Jesus went to Matthew the tax collectors' house and ate with other tax collectors and sinners, the scripture says, and the Pharisees and the teachers, they were like, They questioned the disciples.

They're like, Why is your rabbi? Why is your teacher eating with sinners? Why would he do such a thing? And I think that the fascinating part of this story that's found in the gospels, it doesn't say what Jesus talked about during that meal. Whatever it was, it wasn't important enough to record. It was recorded

that Jesus shared a meal with sinners, a meal being this powerful expression of conversation and community and relationship and love.

So Jesus didn't say love the sinner, but he did say to love our neighbor and we're all sinners. So saying love your neighbor implies we are loving the sinner now at any time, can we call someone a sinner? We've labeled them any time we call someone a sinner, we move them from the status of being our neighbor to the status of being the sinner.

Adam Hamilton, in his book *Half Truths*, says this: If I love you more as a sinner than as my neighbor, then I am bound to focus more on your sin. He goes on to say, Say this. Adam Hamilton goes on to say, This. He says, I will start looking for all the things that are wrong with you. And perhaps without intending it, I will begin thinking of our relationship as this You are a sinner, but I graciously choose to love you anyway.

And then he says, If that sounds a little puffed up, self-righteous and even prideful to you, then you have perceived accurately. We need to be careful about our labels because our labels can change our thoughts, actions, and feelings, both for the good and the bad, depending on the label. So, let's go to the second half of this half-truth.

Did Jesus ever say hate sin? Again, not exactly. But I think we can all agree that Jesus doesn't like sin. Last week, Trent Hill, our youth director, gave this great message and he talked about the woman who was caught in adultery and how the teachers and the elders of the church brought this adulterous to Jesus. And they put him in the center of the circle.

And Jesus said, okay, whoever is without sin, be the one to cast the first stone. And, of course, nobody cast the first stone. They all walked away. But then Jesus said to the woman, Go and sin no more. So Jesus is not a fan of sin. The labels that we use, whether we are using the label sinner or sin, those labels could make people turn from Christianity rather than turn from sin to Jesus.

So, what is sin? Well, in the Hebrew. The Hebrew word for sin is *chata*, and it really means to miss the mark. And there are different ways that this word sin is used in the Bible. For example, in *Judges 20:16*, it talks about skilled workers, skilled warriors. I should say skilled warriors shooting at their target and end, hitting their mark, hitting their target within a hair and not *chata*, not sinning, not missing the mark.

So I've heard about this before, right? We've talked a lot about sin of missing the mark or missing the goal. And the goal is to, of course, that we praise God and we worship God and love God with our whole entire being. And when we stray from that, when we miss that mark, we are sinning.

The book *70 Hebrew Words Every Christian Should Know*. I've talked about this book before, but it talks about sin. Not necessarily as missing the mark, but more as sin, as creating a burden, an action or thought or something that we are doing that creates a burden. Sin as a burden. Sin is something we carry around with us.

The Psalms are bold. There are some sounds that are just these bold prayers that ask God to take away our sins, our hearts, our sins, our burdens. Take away these things from us. Now, there's this Old Testament passage that I want to look at today, and it's from the book of *Zachariah*. Zachariah was a prophet, and he had these visions that he shared with God's people, and he shared these visions to encourage them.

He shared these visions to help them rebuild the temple, to hold on, to hope that God will not fail. God's people. So this is Zachariah chapter three, and this is one of Zacharias' visions. So, starting at verse one, it says this. Then he showed me the high priest, Joshua, standing before the Angel of the Lord and the accuser standing at his right hand to accuse him.

And the Lord said to the accuser, The Lord rebuke you, O accuser, the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you is not this man a brand plucked from the fire. So here we have this vision of Zacharias and Joshua standing before the Angel of the Lord, and the accuser is standing right in between of them. Now, the accuser is often translated as Satan.

And the fact that God rebukes the accuser or Satan twice in this passage indicates that the accuser is a powerful enemy. Now, fun fact, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was trapped when he was just six years old in his house. His house was on fire, and he was rescued from his burning house. How it happened is a neighbor came over and stood on a man's shoulders and got in, plucked John Wesley out of that fire.

And then later on, somebody drew a picture of that scene and John Wesley kept that picture with this verse written beneath it, beneath it until he died. The verse that says a man is not this man, a brand plucked from a fire. So, John Wesley, Joshua. Joshua is standing between the angel and the accuser. So verse three. Now, Joshua was dressed with filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.

The angel said to those who were standing before him, take off his filthy clothes. Now, it was important to be ceremonially clean. We read about that often in the Old Testament. Before you stand before God, you need to be ceremonially clean. Now, the word filthy, according to theologian Kenneth Barker, is the strongest expression in the Hebrew language for filth, of the most vile and loathsome character.

So this is what Joshua is wearing, that kind of filth. So the accuser is the one that is saying that Joshua is unfit to stand before the Lord and that these filthy clothes in this vision likely represent not only Joshua's sins, but the sins of the whole entire nation. Joshua is that heavy with the burden of sin, the burden of guilt.

And he's still filthy even after God's punishment being plucked out of the fire. Joshua is still guilty. So, continuing on. And he said to Joshua. See, I have taken your guilt away from you and I will clothe you with vestal apparel. And I said, Let them put a clean turban on his head.

So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with the apparel, and the angel of the Lord was standing by. See, sin is a burden. And here that sin, that guilt is taken away from Joshua. Now the world is full of guilty Christians carrying the guilt, that weight of sin around with us. But more often times than not, that guilt we have the guilt that we carry is placed on us by others accusers pointing their fingers.

Now, here in this passage, Joshua not only has this burden of sin removed from him, but his clothes in God's righteousness as a theme. This is a theme that we find from General Genesis all the way to Revelation, continuing on first, then the Angel of the Lord warned Joshua, saying, Thus says the Lord of host, If you will walk in my ways and keep my commandments, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.

Now, in this passage, God's grace is apparent. God's grace is abundant. Joshua stood filthy before the Angel, and the Lord gave him a chance. The Lord gave him a chance and removed those filthy clothes.

Not because of something Joshua did, not because of his good works, but because God is greater than the accuser. So the Angel of the Lord does then warn Joshua.

The Angel of the Lord tells Joshua. Okay, now you need to walk in the ways of the Lord. Now, you need to keep the requirements of the Lord. And this is where I think we get caught up in this half Truths of love, the sinner, hate the sin. This is where we move from loving others to last week's half-truth.

God said it. I believe it. That settles it. Well, it says in the Bible this. Therefore, I'm allowed to accuse you of your sin. So we have the Ten Commandments, these requirements that they would have been talking about in this passage. And the Ten Commandments, half of them focus on loving God. And half of them are to help us focus on loving people.

And, of course, Jesus says the same thing, that these are the most important things, the most important requirements that we have. So here is the rest of chapter three. Now, listen, Joshua High Priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you, for they are an omen of things to come. I am going to bring my servant the branch four on the stone that I set before.

Joshua on a single stone with seven facets. I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of Hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On that day, says the Lord of Hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree. Now, the branch symbolizes fruitfulness and life. Often referred to as the Messiah.

And we think about it on the single day when the guilt of the land was lifted. Jesus's reason for the cross was to take away that guilt, take away that burden. The burden was lifted with Jesus when he was resurrected. And then the scripture says that after this day, then we will invite others to sit under the peace and harmony of the fig tree. The fig tree symbolizes prosperity, peace, and harmony.

And this is where we invite people to come and sit with us. People from every nation and every tribe to sit with us. Jon Golden Gai wrote a book, Daniel in The 12 Prophets, Zachariah being one of the 12 prophets, and he wrote this in response to Zachariah chapter three that we just read.

He says this: There's plenty of guilt to go around on the way to church today. We drove past the spot where a teenage teenager was shot by police a year and a week ago. It was partly the youth's fault if he was engaged in a robbery. It was partly the fault of the man who called the police and told them the youth was armed when he wasn't.

It may have been partly the fault of the police, even if they were understandably scared. It was partly our fault as a community. The people on whose behalf the police act and who expect the police to protect us. In Judah, there's plenty of guilt to go around. But wherever it resides, Yahweh, God is committed to dealing with it.

In Zacharias' vision, Joshua is on trial. Joshua is accused of being unclean. The question is, what's the court to do about it? Like a president, the king has the right to issue a pardon. But there are people who think the king should take a tough line. Idolaters should get away with their faithlessness. It would undermine the importance of faithfulness.

Yahweh has decided that this occasion is one of those times when he must risk making an exception. Joshua is to be restored to his position as senior priest. Now, the accuser is right that you have to be

careful about issuing a pardon. It must encourage the recipient to be a casual commitment to Yahweh. But yes, there's plenty of guilt to go around.

And Joshua's pardon is a sign that the whole community can be pardoned. At the moment, the tree of David is cut down, but Yahweh is going to make it produce a new branch. We'll call him the Messiah. But the word doesn't come in the connection in the Old Testament and bring the new age when people will relax under their vine and fig tree.

Our actions in our words, even when we say love the sinner, hate the sin, even though that saying is not entirely wrong. But when we say things, we have to ask the question, are we the accuser, or do we like God? In this instance, giving a pardon is what we are saying and doing. Helping us love God and love our neighbor more is what we are saying and doing.

Helping others love God and their neighbor more. Or is it making us move away? Because if we fail to honor and respect people, we are failing to honor and respect God. I had a colleague friend last week talk about an interesting experience with a Catholic confessional. Basically, a friend of hers went to a confessional for the first time and was told by the priest on the other side of the wall that her list of sins, her list of transgressions, were not enough.

And so he sent her with the list of the Ten Commandments and said, Go think about what else you may need to be forgiven for. Now, I have no experience personally with Catholic confessionals. I'm not saying that this is how all Catholic priests behave. I'm not even saying that what the priest did was wrong because it got me thinking about the idea and the power of a confessional.

It got me thinking about how and if we are held accountable to other Christians that we trust. And I think that the idea of the confessional is partly lost in the Protestant art world. And I wonder what would happen if we did that, if we wrote a list of our transgressions, if we wrote a confessional and we listed the things that we're carrying around with us, the guilt, and we write those things down, and then we take that list and we go and we think about maybe what else should be on that list.

And then we take that list and we stand before God and we say, God, I am, I am filthy, I'm heavy with the burden of guilt. And then we allow God to remove those filthy clothes and clothe us with priestly and royal garments. So instead of labeling people as sinners, we instead think about our own sin, and we invite others to come sit with us under the peace of those fig trees, knowing that our God is a God of grace.

Would you pray with me?

Gracious, Holy loving God, We come to you with a feeling of guilt and burden. We come to you knowing that we've messed up. We've made mistakes, that we've strayed, that we've missed the mark, that we didn't hit. Our goal of loving you like we should. But we also come understanding the power of that single day, that day that Jesus was resurrected, that day that we can release ourselves from the sin, a day where we can focus on loving God and in loving people and not let that heavy burden get in the way.

God, we know that there's evil in this world. We know that people are doing the wrong things and are not following you. Help us to love them anyway. Help us to love them unconditionally with the kind of

love and grace that you have given us. We're all sinners. We've all fallen short. But you love us unconditionally. God be with us as we walk in your ways.

As we hear your requirements on our own lives, change our hearts to love you more. God, we say this in the power of Jesus His name. Amen.