



**The Message:** “Love the Sinner; Hate the Sin” and Other Clichés I Love to Hate

Most of us, when placed in an uncomfortable situation, have at some point opened our mouths and have heard ourselves utter what one might describe as a Christian cliché. Sometimes these clichés lead people to decide things about God that aren't true, but may actually push them away from God.

I did some Facebook research to find the most common clichés. On my personal page, I received several. But I really hit the motherlode on a clergy page: hundreds of posts and 'likes' and stories. It seems clergy hear a lot of clichés particularly at times of crisis or death.

**Why do we need clichés?**

We may believe they are scriptural. We may want or even need them to be in the Bible. My friend Kate Young once led a bible study on the nativity stories. At the end, a member got very upset that Kate left out the story of the little drummer boy and could not believe that it wasn't in the Bible.)

**Why do we need clichés?**

We look for simple answers to hard questions we may want to avoid.

Clichés may justify our own prejudices (If we are against unions, social services or a particular group of people, we can always comfort ourselves in our prejudices by saying, 'God helps those who help themselves').

They have been around so long, and sound so true, that they lodge themselves in our brains and pop out when we are faced with a scary or pain-filled moment. But when we look for them in Scripture, they are nowhere to be found.

While there may be some truth to a cliché, the trouble is that sometimes, when we speak them at the wrong moment or to the wrong person, they hurt people.

What is the litmus test that will help us to let go of clichés?

First, we have to know how to approach scripture:

You can find Bible verses to support all kinds of horrible things -- beating your children, staying with an abusive spouse.

One needs to understand the broad themes of the Bible.

It helps to interpret scripture in the light of Jesus' life and teachings.

Their meanings sometimes conflict. One scripture contradicts another. But if you look at the whole testimony of the whole bible, taking those themes that are repeated over and over again, and if you hold everything up to the teachings and example of Jesus, it's pretty clear that many so called Christian clichés have no foundation.

One thing about many 'Christian clichés' is that they are an attempt to make sense out of something that often does not make sense. We want a world in which we understand everything! And then, feeling we have to say something to make everything better, we utter clichés because just being with someone in a time of sorrow doesn't feel like enough.

It's good to think more deeply about these before you find yourself in the situation when nothing else

springs to mind. We'll look at a few over the next weeks. "It's all a part of God's Plan" "God helps those who help themselves" "God needed another angel in heaven."

Today, "Love the Sinner; Hate the Sin"

This cliché is often the way that we think of Jesus' instruction to love your enemies.

Many who use this phrase don't intend to harm others but wish to express love for another at some level. Recently there have been challenges to churches that brand themselves as inclusive and welcoming, but after people have joined, leaders try to convert or 'heal' them of what the church doesn't *really* accept. They argue this is perfectly okay because they love the sinner but hate the sin.

Jesus never asked us to "Love the sinner, hate the sin" and neither did any other Biblical writer. The closest phrases to this in Christian history, are a letter from St. Augustine to a group of nuns (encouraging them to have "love for humankind and hatred of sins").

In Paul's Letter to the Romans 3.22, we learn that "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory."

Jesus never said, 'love the sinner.'

If Jesus had commanded his disciples to 'love the sinner,' they would begin looking at other people more as sinners than neighbours. And that, inevitably, would lead to judgment.

"You are a sinner, but I graciously choose to love you anyway."

But Jesus never said, "Love sinners." What he did say, was, "Love your neighbour."

That's pretty much everyone. And if you are in doubt, this week's gospel cinches it. "Love your enemies." People you haven't met. People you don't like. The Greek word for enemy can mean people you don't like, AND it can also mean people who don't like you! Love people you don't like, and love people who don't like you.

What gets in the way of our love of neighbour? Our own dislikes, our own prejudices, in short, our own sins.

'Love the sinner hate the sin' can be a permission slip to marginalise and wound others. It can give us permission to condescend to others by defining them by their sins.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus teaches: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."

When Jesus speaks to sinful people, he speaks of God's forgiveness. That means forgiveness of all, including you and me.

A friend and colleague, the oldest of eight, occasionally confided to me about one brother, who had worn out relationships with all of his siblings, borrowing money he never paid back and taking advantage of them in every way he could. He had just written asking her for \$750. She was planning to turn him down for the first time. I could see how difficult this was for her. I suggested that instead, she send him \$1000 and a letter saying that she loved him and he must be in great need since he knew she too struggled financially. It was a gamble she decided to take. It was the last loan he asked for. He got his life together and reconnected with his family.

Jesus challenges us to love -- who are we to determine what is sin. Just love.