1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 18:10-14 May 27, 2018

*Half Truths, Part 4*

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*Ancient Words by Michael W. Smith*

Holy words long preserved for our walk in this world  
They resound with God's own heart. Oh, let the ancient words impart  
Words of Life, words of Hope. Give us strength, help us cope.  
In this world, where e'er we roam, ancient words will guide us home.  
  
Ancient words ever true. Changing me and changing you.  
We have come with open hearts. Oh, let the ancient words impart.  
Holy words of our Faith, handed down to this age,  
came to us through sacrifice, Oh, heed the faithful words of Christ.  
  
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Ancient words ever true. Changing me and changing you.  
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Our half-truth for today is wrapped up in the often-used phrase, **“Love the sinner, hate the sin.”** This phrase, unlike the other phrases we have looked at in this series, is one that is probably not used by unbelievers or non-church goers. The other phrases, **“Everything happens for a reason,” “God helps those who help themselves,”** and **“God won’t give you more than you can handle,”** are used from time-to-time by more than committed disciples of Jesus Christ. But this one, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” I think, is used exclusively by “church people.” And that’s not a compliment.

This phrase is not in the Bible, nor is the phrase “No sin is worse than another.” Both of the phrases, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” and “No sin is worse than another,” are usually spoken with good intentions. Usually when we say one of these things we mean that we are all sinners and therefore shouldn’t be judging others. But let’s take a good look this morning and think about what this phrase is indicating about the hearts of both the speaker and the listener.

Let us pray: *Merciful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thank you for teaching us. Thank you for helping us. Thank you for giving us the very mind of Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Help us to know your truth – and may it set us free to be more like Jesus. This we pray in his name, Amen.*

The most commonly used word for sin in the New Testament is *hamartia* which means to ‘miss the mark.’ What is the mark? The mark is God’s intention or will for us. So, we can say that sin can apply to any thought, word, or action that is contrary to God’s will. It is God’s will that we pay attention when the word of God is being taught. So, if your mind wanders during this sermon to what you’re going to do later today, that is not God’s will and you are sinning. Even a failure to do something we know God wants us to do is sinning, just as doing something we know we should not be doing is sinning. We have gone off the path that God calls us to follow. Choosing to stay home and sleep in, or mow the grass, or watch the TV preacher instead of gathering with the Body of Christ on a Sunday morning is sinning – because we are clearly instructed not to give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. Lying, including exaggerating a story or embellishing a story, is sinning. Taking something that doesn’t belong to you is stealing, including stealing someone’s reputation by telling things to others that are no one’s business but that person’s alone. Stealing is a sin. Wanting something that someone else has is coveting. Coveting is a sin. Thinking you are more spiritual than the next guy is pride. Pride is a sin – in fact – pride is what got us into this mess we’re in in the first place. Adam & Eve thought they knew better than God, even though God had clearly told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That’s pride – thinking we are better than others – including thinking we know more than God. “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”* (Romans 3:23)

All sin must be taken seriously. Jesus said (Matthew 5:29-30), *“If your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell.”* Jesus isn’t really suggesting we take out our eye or cut off our hand. He is simply saying that sin is serious business and we need to do everything we can to avoid it.

The phrase, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” is half true in that we are called to love sinners! Of course we are. Jesus was called the friend of sinners. But Jesus never said, “Love the sinner.” He modeled loving sinners. But he never said, “Love the sinner.” What he did say (as we read in our call to worship), “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Who is your neighbor? Anyone. Everyone.

The problem with the phrase “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” is that it causes us to look at people more as sinners than as neighbors. It creates an “us/them” mentality. “I’m ok, you’re not okay. You’re a sinner, but I love you anyway!” This is just so contrary to Jesus’ message. Let’s look together at Luke 18:10-14, *“****10****Imagine two men walking up a road, going to the temple to pray. One of them is a Pharisee and the other is a despised tax collector.****11****Once inside the temple, the Pharisee stands up and prays this prayer in honor of himself: “God, how I thank You that I am not on the same level as other people—crooks, cheaters, the sexually immoral—like this tax collector over here.****12****Just look at me! I fast not once but twice a week, and I faithfully pay my tithes on every penny of income.”****13****Over in the corner, the tax collector begins to pray, but he won’t even lift his eyes to heaven. He pounds on his chest in sorrow and says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* ***14****Now imagine these two men walking back down the road to their homes. Listen, it’s the tax collector who walks home clean before God, and not the Pharisee, because whoever lifts himself up will be put down and whoever takes a humble place will be lifted up.”* (The Voice)

Now let’s look together at 1 Timothy 1:12-17. This is the Apostle Paul speaking, *“****12****I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service.****13****Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.****14****The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* ***15****Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.****16****But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.****17****Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”*

Jesus knew our tendency, folks, to judge others and focus on their shortcomings and sins. Instead of dealing with the log in our own eye, he knew we would be ever-so-ready to pick at the speck in the eye of another. He knew we would struggle to truly see our own shortcomings expressed in our unwillingness or maybe even inability to truly love our neighbors as ourselves.

Two weeks ago, many people all over the world watched the royal wedding. The preacher that day was Bishop Michael Bruce Curry from the American Episcopal Church. His message was heard far and wide that day and has since spread even further and wider. The theme of his message? Love. Listen to some of what he preached that day, “*The late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr once said, and I quote: "We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way."* *There's power in love. Don't underestimate it. Don't even over-sentimentalize it. There's power, power in love.*

*If you don't believe me, think about a time when you first fell in love. The whole world seemed to center around you and your beloved.* *Oh, there's power, power in love. Not just in its romantic forms, but any form, any shape of love. There's a certain sense in which when you are loved, and you know it, when someone cares for you, and you know it, when you love, and you show it - it actually feels right.*

*There is something right about it. And there's a reason for it. The reason has to do with the source. We were made by a power of love, and our lives were meant - and are meant - to be lived in that love. That's why we are here.*

*Ultimately, the source of love is God himself: the source of all of our lives. There's an old medieval poem that says: 'Where true love is found, God himself is there.’* *The New Testament says it this way: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God. Those who do not love, do not know God.” Why? For “God is love."*

*There's power in love. There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can.* *There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will.* *There's power in love to show us the way to live.*

*Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in human history.* *A movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world - and a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself.* *I'm talking about power. Real power. Power to change the world.* *If you don't believe me, well, there were some old slaves in America's Antebellum South who explained the dynamic power of love and why it has the power to transform.*

*"They explained it this way. They sang a spiritual, even in the midst of their captivity. It's one that says 'There is a balm in Gilead...' a healing balm, something that can make things right.* *"'There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.'* *"And one of the stanzas actually explains why. They said: 'If you cannot preach like Peter, and you cannot pray like Paul, you just tell the love of Jesus, how he died to save us all."'*

*"Oh, that's the balm in Gilead! This way of love, it is the way of life. They got it. He died to save us all.* *"He didn't die for anything he could get out of it. Jesus did not get an honorary doctorate for dying. He didn't... he wasn't getting anything out of it. He gave up his life, he sacrificed his life, for the good of others, for the good of the other, for the wellbeing of the world... for us.*

*That's what love is. Love is not selfish and self-centered. Love can be sacrificial, and in so doing, becomes redemptive. And that way of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love changes lives, and it can change this world.* *"If you don't believe me, just stop and imagine. Think and imagine a world where love is the way."*

*Imagine our homes and families where love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way.* *Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce where this love is the way.* *Imagine this tired old world where love is the way. When love is the way - unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.*

*When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again.* *When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook.* *When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.* *When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more.*”

That’s not just gobbledygook that he said to get attention. That’s the truth, brothers and sisters! That’s the truth that went all over the world from St. George’s Chapel that day. If we could just have eyes to see one another with love, coming from a place within ourselves that knows we can only love because he first loved us, a still and quiet place of humility in the knowledge of our own sinfulness, we can make of this old world a new world. Think of Jesus saying this, “Love your neighbor despite the fact that *you* are a sinner.” “Love my neighbor despite the fact that *I* am a sinner.”

In thinking and praying over this message for today, the wonderful, old hymn “Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is Calling” came on my car radio. For those who might have a tendency to grab hold of the phrase, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” the words in the old hymn, “Come home. Come home. Ye who are sinners come home,” sound in our heads like this, “Come home. Come home. Susie, and Tom, and Mike, and Rose and … you sinners need to get yourselves home to Jesus.” Instead of “I am a sinner, I need to get myself back on track with Jesus.” Every time we are pointing a finger at someone else, there are three other fingers pointing back at ourselves.

Love already changed the world on the cross of Calvary for you and me. Love already changed the world. It’s our call to show the world the change that Love has made in us. That doesn’t happen when we live by the mantra, “love the sinner, hate the sin.” That happens when we just love. Just love. Love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen? Amen.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. A day we honor and remember those who gave their lives in service of our country. We must remember that all who have served and who are serving now signed up with the understanding that they may not ever come home alive. No matter at what season of history they served, a time of war or a time of peace, they were made aware that the season can change in the blinking of an eye. In a time of terrorist attacks and nuclear war threats, we know that very well, don’t we? And yet, knowing what might come, they went. For love of country. For love of the freedoms that we take for granted. For love of family and friends who stayed behind to pray, freely, whether within the privacy of their homes or in the gathering of the community. *“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (John 15:13).