Does God hate the sin but love the sinner?

The present climate

In the present discussions about so-called same-sex marriage, talk wanders to the matter of the Christian church’s stance on homosexuality. This can give opportunity for some good reflection and discussion among us. We can talk about how we ought to treat members of our church who might have personal struggles with homosexuality, or we can discuss how we ought to present the scriptural view of the matter to our fellow citizens or to those in government over us.

Unfortunately, the church’s stance on homosexuality is often forced to be reactive. Whether we want to or not, we are drawn into responding defensively to those persons who accuse the Christian church of being homophobic or bigoted. For the charge quickly flies: “I thought Christians were supposed to accept everyone in love and not judge them. Isn’t that what Jesus did, after all?”

A tidy response

When it comes to deflecting angry charges of homophobia, or just trying to articulate a scriptural stance on homosexuality, one reply is regularly heard from the mouths of Christians: “God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.” Obviously, the thinking is that if this is the principle by which God views homosexuality, certainly the Christian church should do the same when she takes her stance on the matter.

This conveniently simple and memorable principle seems at once to have the tone of being correct: “Of course God doesn’t hate sinners – that’s why He gave his Son to die for them.” Some have even wondered if this little saying could be found nestled somewhere in the Scriptures.

Indeed, there is truth in this saying. We know from Scripture that God is antithetically opposed to any and every sin. For example, we hear God saying, “I hate robbery and iniquity” (Isaiah 61:8); and, “I hate divorce” (Malachi 2:16). Proverbs 6 even lists six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to Him: “Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood,” and so on (vv 16-19). God does hate sin, for “God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

And again, who could dispute that God loves sinners? The well-known John 3:16 is a shining summary of this scriptural truth. Our gracious God wants that no sinner should perish, but that everyone should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Clarity from Scripture

As we evaluate this saying then, Scripture does tell us that God views sin on the one hand and those who commit sin on the other, in a different way. In this sense the saying has a small element of truth, but we must quickly say more. For not only is this saying not found in the Bible, it also suggests something that is contrary to the Bible’s teaching. We know from the Bible that God does hate the sinner. His hatred of sin is so perfect that He cannot show love to those who reject his ways.

Especially the Psalms clearly illustrate that God’s wrath rests on the sinner. Setting the tone for the whole Psalter, we read in Psalm 1:5, “The wicked will not stand in the judgment.” And this thought is continued in Psalm 5, where it is said of God, “The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong” (v 5). Psalm 11 is more graphic, “The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked He will rain fiery coals and
burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot” (vv 5-6). Here there can be no airbrushing away of God’s fierce hate for sin and sinners alike.

The New Testament speaks similarly. Out of his intense hatred for sin, God shows fury against it: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men” (Romans 1:18). Moreover, God has righteous anger for the unrepentant sinner as well: “Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).

While we – thankfully! – cannot dispute that God has love for sinners, we also cannot say that God has only love for sinners. The Scriptures are clear that He also has wrath for the wicked and even hatred for those who do not do his will.

“Problem and solution”

The problem we might have in seeing through the error of this cliché is that it is hard for us humans to reconcile God’s hatred and God’s love. Scripture clearly speaks of God having both, yet in our minds, hatred (and that includes its expression in wrath) and love for the same object are usually mutually exclusive. As a trite example, if I love lasagna, I can hardly hate it at the same time. So then, the saying “God hates the sin, but loves the sinner” sounds correct because it puts God’s love and God’s hatred for humans as sinners into tidy compartments, without denying either of them.

But because of the greatness of God’s attributes (or perfections), both love and hate for the same object can truly be expressed by Him, and without contradiction. That is, God can be justly wrathful against fallen man, while at the same time God can be filled with love for fallen man. Love and hate exist in God, side by side.

We must acknowledge our human limitations when we search for a “solution” to this tension in God. As with some other sticky theological “problems,” here we can only humbly repeat what Scripture says, as we have done above. And in this case we can look to Golgotha for the marvelous way that this love and hatred of God is worked out.

For it was at the cross that God showed the great depth of his just hatred for sin. He showed this hatred in cutting off his own Son (Matthew 27:46) and in laying upon his Son the eternal curse that we deserved for our sin (Galatians 3:13). But this intense wrath of God against Christ shows us at the very same time the great depth of God’s love for sinners. The Father, though He was full of righteous wrath against both sin and sinners, still could love mankind so much that He chose to reject his Son in its place. Through his hatred for his Son on the cross, the Father accepts those who believe in Him back into loving fellowship.

Our response

A tidy cliché quickly uttered will not help the Christian church in dealing with members who struggle with homosexuality. Nor will it help us in properly responding to those who attack the church for how we (allegedly) hate and mistreat homosexuals. Rather, we need to respond with the clear words that Scripture gives to us.

That is, we must say that if sinners do not repent, God’s wrath remains heavy upon them. Even we who are members of the church are sinners and therefore of ourselves we all stand as “hated by God.” But if we repent from our sins and believe in Jesus Christ, God gives us abundant love, and He forgives us completely.

Today the accusation of being judgmental is often thrown at Christians. And it is true, are we not being judgmental of those who are homosexual when we call them names or share crude jokes about them? We might try to excuse our unchristian words by saying homosexuals deserve it because they are such vile sinners, or because homosexual sin is somehow worse than anything we might do. But we must not be judgmental, for this is not applying the same standard of
judgment to others as to ourselves (cf. Matthew 7:1-5). Again, let us remember that we are all vile sinners, and that all of us are called to repent every day from our disobedience.

We must not be judgmental of homosexuals nor of any other sinners, but we must judge, as Scripture tells us to do. In the humility that comes from first receiving undeserved mercy ourselves, we are called to point out sin wherever we see it and, as we have opportunity, we must not be shy in calling others to repentance. Pointing out sin, we then can also point out the path of forgiveness, opened through the cross.

Let the Christian church never give a false sense of security to those around her by repeating as gospel truth, “God hates your sin, but God loves you.” Rather, let us say, “God hates your sin, and God hates it so much He gave his own Son to die for it. Yes, He gave his Son in love, so that if you repent and put your faith in Him, you will be saved from the deserved fires of eternal death.”

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