

# Hate the Sin and Love the Sinner?

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## **Context, Context, Context**

Christians can be guilty of making pithy statements of a theological nature that require a lot of explanation for the phrase to be accurate. If an explanation is not offered, we are sometimes demanding a lot of the reader to put all the pieces together. And readers aren't always in a generous mood, especially if they have a certain negative predisposition towards the person they are reading.

Context is the friend of theology and biblical interpretation. Sometimes we hear the phrase, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner," and wonder what to think. To make sense of this statement one would have to have a sophisticated understanding of how this can be both true and false or the different senses in which the statement may be true or false.

Far from wishing theological precision to cause us to fight more online, perhaps being able to understand the senses in which the aforementioned statement may be true will keep us from assuming the person meant it in the sense in which it is not true. We have all been guilty, I am sure, of assuming interpretations that could be easily resolved by a more generous perspective.

## **God's Love**

God is love (1 John 4:8). God loves his Son, his creation, all humans, the elect, and the Spirit-wrought goodness in the elect. His love is an affection; it arises inwardly and extends outward. Nothing causes God to love, but his love is caused by himself. God's universal love to all things is established in Psalm 145:9, "The Lord is good to call, and his mercy is over all that he had made." Notwithstanding this fact of God's love, the question of God's "hate" was also an issue to be harmonized with his love.

Reformed theologians spent some time discussing the question whether God hates the elect before their conversion. The primary question is not what is God's view of the non-elect – and even here we need to tread carefully since he can be said to love them in a certain sense (i.e., "natural love") – but how does God view his elect before they come to faith in Christ?

God, who is immutable, does not, properly speaking, change his mind towards those whom he has set his love upon from eternity. It would make God mutable if he were to not love the elect before Christ's death, but love them only afterwards. There is, however, mutability in the creature. God wills a change in his elect, but his will does not change towards them.

We may ask a more specific question considering God's unchanging love to his elect: How can we speak of God's love and hatred towards the elect before they come to saving faith?

Taking as axiomatic that God loves his elect from eternity, we may say that God loves his elect with a love of purpose, but not yet with a love of acceptance. Or we may use the old distinction between God's love of benevolence and his love of complacency. Benevolence is the root of love; complacency is the flower of love. Thus God wills well towards his elect before faith but is only well pleased with them after faith. Or he loves the elect before faith to make them his friends, but after faith they are his friends.

### **God's Hate**

However, there is a sense in which God "hates" his elect before they come to faith. Those who do not believe are under the wrath of God (Eph. 2:3, "children of wrath like the rest of mankind"). But this must be explained judiciously. As Charnock argues, God "does not hate their persons, nor does he hate any natural or moral good in them" (Works, 3:345). In fact, Charnock suggests that Christ even loved the morality he saw in the rich young man. Any "tincture" of goodness God will love. For this reason, many theologians, beginning with Augustine, quoted Wisdom 11:24, "For you love all things that exist, and have loathing for none of the things which you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it." But while God does not hate their persons, he does hate their sins since sin must always and necessarily be hated by God. God hated the practices of the prodigal son, but he still loved his person. God loves all his creatures since they retain, to some degree, his image. If God hates the sins of believers, he certainly hates the sins of his elect before they come to faith: "If he hates sin in its weakness, much more in its strength," says Charnock (p. 345).

God hates sin objectively, and so his hatred of sin terminates upon the person. Ultimately, persons are the objects of God's wrath, not sins in the abstract. Actions are not punished in the abstract but persons performing actions are punished. So, there is a sense in which elect unbelievers are hated before they come to faith because their sins terminate upon them as persons. Thus, Charnock posits: "no displeasure can be manifested without some marks of it upon the person that lies under that displeasure" (2:252). Thus, God hates their state (i.e., state of enmity). They are in a state of wrath and are thus objects of wrath until they believe. But God also hates the elect before faith "as to the withholding effects of his love" (3:346). Consequently, God hates the elect before faith "because," says Charnock, "being in that state a child of wrath, the wrath of God abides on him, and the curses of the law are in force against him" (3:346).

Nothing can make a creature, whether elect or non-elect, an object of hate or God's curse except sin. God only hates sin. But as he judges sin – as he must! – the judgments terminate upon the person.

What this means in sum is this: God can both love and hate the same person, and in different ways. As Augustine said, "in a wonderful and divine manner, even when He hated us, He loved us; for He hated us, in so far as we were not what He Himself had made; and because our own iniquity had not in every part consumed His work, He knew at once both how, in each of us, to hate what we had done, and to love what He had done" (Lectures on... John, 2:461). Naturally, when a person comes to faith they are no longer hated in any way, shape, or form. God will necessarily hate the sin in the believer, but he cannot hate the believer. Again, Augustine: "Seeing, then, that He hates nothing that He has made, who can worthily describe how much He loves the members of His Only-begotten?" (2:461). To hate the believer God would have to hate his Son, which is an ontological impossibility.

### **Our Love and Hate**

As for our own reception of persons, we can also aim to both love and hate depending upon the person and the context. Consider, for example, the attitude of the Psalmist (see also 139:19–22)

"I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD" (Psalm 31:6).

"I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked" (Psalm 26:5).

We can and must hate persons in a certain context, but in a different context we can exercise love towards a specific person. If I am in direct (or immediate) contact with an enemy, I have a duty to love him:

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27–28).

"To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head'" (Romans 12:20).

"If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him" (Exodus 23:4).

These verses highlight our duty of love in an immediate relationship involving an enemy.

Distinctions, Distinctions, Distinctions

In sum, we can therefore say:

- 1) God hates the sin and hates the non-elect sinner. He will ultimately judge this person, not just their sins.
- 2) God also hates the sin and loves the non-elect sinner. This person is still God's creature and God shows much love towards non-elect sinners, e.g., food, rain, sun, physical and intellectual gifts, etc.
- 3) God hates the sin and hates the elect sinner before conversion. The elect sinner must know they are under God's wrath, and not eternally justified or justified at birth, until they repent and believe.
- 4) God hates the sin and loves the elect sinner before conversion. God has eternally and lovingly willed salvation for such a person.
- 5) God hates the sin but loves the converted sinner. God looks upon such a person in Christ but does not lose sight of sin, which he hates necessarily.
- 6) God hates the sin and cannot hate the converted sinner. God can sooner hate his own Son – which is impossible – than hate someone who belongs to his Son.
- 7) We can hate the sin and hate the sinner (i.e., the wicked). We can say we hate those who murder children.
- 8) We can hate the sin and love the sinner. We can minister lovingly to a woman who wants to have an abortion.
- 9) We can hate the sin and love the believer. We do not excuse sins in our children when we raise them.
- 10) We can hate the sin and never hate the believer. We cannot hate those whom God cannot hate and we must love those who we belong to through union with Christ and the body.

So, yes, hate the tweet, but love the tweeter...

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