***HATE THE EVIL! HONOR THE GOOD!***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Psalm 15 and Romans 12:9-21

*Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right are those in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord.* So says the psalmist, as you just heard. Perhaps that comes as no great surprise. *Hate the evil (or as Euguene Peterson paraphrases it more poetically: Despise the despicable!) and honor the good s*eems commonsensical to all those who want to follow a righteous God, a God who is described as good and just and loving. Perhaps that is where I should stop with this sermon – *Hate the evil! Honor the good! Amen*. And I know some of you would assure me that was my best sermon ever. But at the risk of missing a golden opportunity to earn those accolades, I do think there is a little more to be said about what the psalmist said in this mix of contrasting verbs and nouns with a big “but” in the middle of it all.

*Hate* and *honor* – those are the contrasting verbs – and what a contrast they make! There are those who seem to think that Christians should always honor and never hate – anyone, anything, anytime. The writer in Ecclesiastes may say, “*For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven, including a time to love and a time to hate*,” but some Christians seem to think that the time to hate has passed. Yet there seem to be some exceptions, even in the divine mind.

* “I hate, I despise your festivals,” says the Lord through the prophet Amos. “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”
* “I love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing,” says the Lord through the prophet Isaiah. (61:8)
* “I beg you not to do this abominable thing that I hate,” says the Lord about the people’s worship and pursuit of other gods in Jeremiah. (Jer. 44:4)
* “Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate,” says the Lord through the prophet Zechariah. (Zech. 8:17)

Clearly there are *things* the Lord hates, behaviors the Lord despises. Hate makes no room for exceptions, and when it comes to evil, injustice, idolatry, and the trappings of faith without the substance of faith, the Lord hates them all!

Paul echoes that divine sentiment when he tells the Romans, “Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good!” There are some things we should hate, some things for which we should make no rationalization, no excuse, no exception, no buts, if you will. They are things that run contrary to God’s character and God’s intent for our lives as those created in the image of God. The Lord expects more of us! But within the pages of Scripture those are all *things or actions* the Lord hates and urges us to hate as well; they are never people. The Lord says, “Despise the despicable for what they do. “Hate the evil!” not “Hate the person.” And therein lies the problem, for we have a hard time hating what the Lord hates without hating too those who do what the Lord hates or at least those who do what we hate.

Jesus addresses that issue head on in his Sermon on the Mount when he says: *You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate*

*your enemy.” But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

Jesus rejects the hatred of people, even enemies, for all are created in the image of God. He does not countenance or excuse what they have done; but he does not equate the evildoer and the evil. Interestingly, the only people who are hated are Jesus’ followers; they are hated by those who persecute them. Those who fight against God hate God’s people; those who follow Christ are to love their enemies even as they hate the evil that they do! And that is not easy to do! Jesus never said it would be easy; in fact he warned us that it would be hard when he said, “If you would be my disciple, then deny yourself take up your cross daily, and follow me.” One of those crosses we bear is that command to love our enemies while hating what they do!

We live in a time when a lot of folks seem unable to make that distinction and are filled with hate for other people. It is hate fueled by tribalism, racism, nativism, and a lot of other isms that find reasons to hate people who are different, simply because they look differently, think differently, speak differently, or act differently. Those who stormed the Capitol on January 6 bore signs and shouted slogans voicing hate against those whose politics differed from theirs. Some shouted racist slurs at police officers charged with protecting the Capitol, and a host of white supremacist groups planned for and participated in the violence. The temptation is to counter their hate with hate toward them, or in other corners to excuse their evil as simply misplaced passion. But as followers of Christ, we are called to reject that kind of hate on both counts, not only in theory but in practice, to hate their hate but not hate the people who voiced it!

For, hating others is not the only hateful threat to righteous living, so too is ***not*** hating what is evil or despicable. The object of hate urged by the psalmist and by Paul is what is evil – what tears down instead of builds up, what contradicts God’s intention for our lives and life together. Righteous ends do not justify unrighteous means! Evil lurks at every bend, tempting us to embrace it – just this once – or to excuse it as a “necessary” evil or to adjust our concept of right and wrong. Martin Luther King, Jr. responded to such temptations in these words:

*There are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things.*

God too calls us to be maladjusted to such things, and to a host of other evils that are constantly nudging us toward unfaithfulness. In the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick that we will sing shortly:

*Lo! The hosts of evil round us scorn thy Christ, assail his ways.*

*From the fears that long have bound us free our hearts to faith and praise.*

*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days!*

Fosdick recognizes that the hosts of evil prey on our fears, and if we are to resist them, then we must heed the words of Jesus, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid!*” For, fear is the tool of evil as we have seen again and again around the world and in our public life. So, we pray for courage to overcome our fear, courage to resist the evil, and wisdom to discern the evil from the good.

“‘*The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties…but right through every human heart*,’” writes Alexander Solzhenitsyn.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is within us, and evil is constantly tempting us to step over that line, rebel against God, and choose wrongly. Embrace the good, honor the good, says the psalmist, or more literally, honor *those who fear God*. *Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*, says the psalmist. It is not trembling-in-your-boots kind of fear, but it is not wholly divorced from that concept either. It is awe, reverence, and respect for God that recognizes that God is great, powerful, just, merciful, and loving, but also has expectations of us, expectations we fail to live up to again and again and again. Fear of the Lord does not discourage us from trying to be obedient and faithful; fear of the Lord inspires us on that path because we know something about the nature of that holy Lord!

Honor those folks who fear the Lord, says the psalmist. The word honor is the same Hebrew word that we find in the fifth commandment: *Honor your father and mother*. By honor, the psalmist does not mean put on a pedestal like some kind of Olympic medalist. By honor the psalmist means show respect, treat fairly; Paul suggests to the church in Rome that they should “*outdo one another in showing honor*.” On Friday we honored Dick Beard as we gathered in this space to celebrate his life, commend him to God’s eternal care, and remember God’s resurrection promises for him in Christ. It was God who was worshiped, but Dick’s memory that we honored. We honor those who fear the Lord by recalling their example and fearing the Lord ourselves, by seeking to do good, to be good and faithful. For, in honoring them, we honor the God who they serve, the God we are called to serve. It is honor that has nothing to do with certificates, trophies, awards, or long-winded speeches apart from this sermon, and everything to do with faithful living day after day after day. Paul describes what it looks like:

*Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Repay no one evil for evil. And if it is possible (for it always takes two in this regard), live peaceably with all.*

That is how we honor those who fear the Lord, and it is how we honor God – by doing the good thing, the faithful thing, the righteous thing, the right thing!

Which leaves us only with the big BUT in the middle of the psalm. The righteous are those in whose eyes the wicked are despised, ***but*** who honor those who fear the Lord. Why *but*? Why not *and* or some other conjunction? Perhaps it is because to honor the good you must hate the evil. It is a choice. You cannot hate the evil if you do not also honor the good; you cannot honor the good if you embrace the evil. Those who do what is right embrace both admonitions: Hate the evil! Honor the good! Sometimes our hearts, minds, and wills are torn between the two. We would rather choose one or the other – whichever is easier in the moment. But, says the psalmist, embrace them both – Hate the evil, but also honor the good! For it is those who hate the evil but honor the good who may abide in God’s tent, those who may dwell on God’s holy hill, those who shall never be moved – says the psalmist, says the Lord. Amen

1. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*:1918-56, Paris Editions du Seuil, 1973 quoted by William H. Willimon in *Fear of the Other*, Abingdon Press:2016, p.5 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)