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What Jesus Hated

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HATE. A very strong word. It was a word that we were discouraged to use when I was a boy. “I hate you,” I would say through clenched teeth to my brother in a fit of anger during a trivial boyhood fight. And my mother would inevitably say, “Michael, don’t use that word. You don’t know what you’re really saying.”

And she was right. My wife and I discouraged our own children from using the word when they were little. And I find that I very seldom use the word myself, except in trite expressions like “I hate being cold,” or “I hate green peppers!”

But hate is not trite. On a purely human level, hatred is destructive. It is the emotion of anger, or fear, or disgust that has settled into a destructive pattern of life. It is an attempt to reject a person completely and to rob that person of his or her very existence. That is why hatred is said to be the equivalent of murdering a person in our heart. Hatred prevents a person from loving God and from having eternal life (1 John 3:15; 4:8, 20; cf. Matt. 5:21-22). These are terribly strong words.

A Time to Hate

But on the other hand, the same words for hate in both the Old and New Testaments that can speak of destructive patterns of life are also used to describe ways in which hate is both appropriate, and necessary. There is “a time to hate” (Eccl. 3:8). In the life of fallen men and women, hate will inevitably end up destructive. But in the life of a person who has been touched by the love of God Himself, hate will prove invaluable to living safely and wisely in this world that still lies under the power of the evil one (Eph. 2:1-3).

Specifically, we must learn to hate what Jesus hates. This especially means to learn to develop a pattern of life in which we decisively reject whatever would harm us spiritually, or reject whatever is antithetical to God. Love is the opposite of hatred, as goodness and righteousness are the opposite of evil and wickedness. In love we give to another person what is good for him or her. In hate we reject what would be bad for us or for those for whom we are responsible. It might surprise and disturb us, but the same Jesus who told His disciples that they were to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44) also told the crowd that they were to “hate” father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—and even their own life (Luke 14:26).

As baffling as that may seem, we must come to grips with what this tells us about Jesus, and what that means for our own lives.

Jesus Hates Evil

The primary truth for us to understand is that God hates evil, but loves righteousness. If we rightly understand that the cross defines the central purpose of Jesus’ earthly ministry, then we will also rightly understand that Jesus came to defeat the very wickedness that had held humanity in its grip since Adam’s tragic fall. Jesus came as God’s promised Messianic deliverer, and what motivated Him was His love of righteousness, and His hatred of wickedness (Heb. 1:8-9; citing Ps. 45:6-7).

Starkly stated, Jesus hates evil. This is an absolutely essential, and convicting, truth. But it is also



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absolutely essential for us to understand that Jesus loves goodness and righteousness. That is why the apostle Paul writes, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Rom. 12:9).

Hatred is therefore not arbitrary. We do not choose what to hate. All appropriate hatred is in some way directed toward evil and wickedness. So we must understand clearly and truthfully what is evil from God’s perspective, and then we are utterly and completely to reject it—hate it. At the same time we are to develop a passion for what is righteous and good from God’s perspective, and utterly and completely cling to it—love it.

If we truly love Jesus, our greatest daily ambition must center on becoming like Him, who is the essence of goodness and righteousness. We will nurture a healthy conscience that is repulsed by our own tendencies to blur the line between good and evil. Have we gossiped? Lied? Gone back on our word? Have we ever taken something that didn’t belong to us? Have we ever acted with pride and arrogance, or spoken perversely? Have we acted flippantly toward our marriage or family by engaging in adultery or flirtatious relations with another person? All of these God hates because of the evil they bring. And so should we. “To fear the LORD is to hate evil” (Prov. 8:13; cf. Zech. 8:17; Prov. 8:13; Isa. 61:8; Mal. 2:16).

Jesus Hates the World

System, Not the World

Although God so loved the world that He gave His Son, he is at war with this world. Jesus says of his disciples, “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world” (John 17:14). This may sound contradictory, but it points out an important distinction. The Greek word for “world” (*kosmos*) can indicate one of three very different things: (1) the created order, (2) the persons capable of believing in Jesus, or (3) the world system that is opposed to God. God loves the world of people that he created, but not the world system. Likewise, we are not to love that world system. James, the brother of Jesus says, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4; cf. 1 John 2:15-17).

Jesus loves the world of sinners for whom He died, but He hates the world system that wars against Him and His kingdom. This is the basis of the adage, “Hate the sin, but love the sinner.” We are to do likewise. We live in a culture that is at odds with Jesus. Many of the former values that once were foundational to our society have either been rejected or are being challenged. We must learn from the risen Jesus who commended the Ephesians because, “You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (Rev. 2:6). The Nicolaitans practiced idolatry and immorality under the banner of spiritual liberty,¹ claiming that they gained greater spiritual insight by eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols and by engaging in sexual promiscuity. Jesus hates this perversion of values. We are to do likewise, because in our culture it is easy to be fooled by those who parade alternative lifestyles under the banners of “pluralism” and “freedom” and “rights.” To identify ourselves clearly with Jesus is going to put us at odds with the world system, because we will hate what God hates, whether it is adultery, frivolous divorce, violence, or the modern idolatry of worshiping money or power (cf. Mal. 2:16). To hate the world system means to reject the values of the world that would lead us into wickedness. But we are clearly to love the world of people for whom Jesus died.

Jesus Hates Whatever Keeps Us From Him

To the crowds that had been following Him around for some time, Jesus made a radical challenge. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Jesus certainly did not mean this to go contrary to the Decalogue’s admonition to honor father and mother, because he stiffly rebuked the Pharisees for invalidating this commandment by their traditions (Matt. 15:3-6). Jesus upheld biblical family relationships.

But commitment to family can present a rival challenge to a person’s commitment to Jesus. Families can be well meaning, but if they attempt to keep one of their own from Jesus, it is a great evil. One of my former professors was raised in a devout, orthodox Jewish family. While he was in

training to become a rabbi, he was introduced to the gospel message about Jesus. His family told him that if he became a Christian they would disown him and declare him dead in their eyes, because they believed that it would be a disgrace to their Jewish beliefs. They meant well, but my professor knew that He must choose Jesus over his family, because it was a matter of eternal life.

Jesus did not call for a disruption of the family, or rebellion against it. Rather, nothing—including family, or wealth, or career or anything at all—must keep a person from following Jesus to eternal life. He stated this similarly in other ways.

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matt. 6:24).

"The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).

These are all challenges for non-Christians to count the cost of following Jesus to eternal life. Whatever may keep us from loving and living with Jesus as our God and Savior must be utterly and completely rejected. He alone is our highest priority, and must continue to be throughout our lives.

Jesus Hates Religious Hypocrisy

Virtually every time that we find Jesus angry or acting out of anger, the object of His wrath was religious hypocrisy. Jesus consistently condemned the religious leaders for performing external religious acts of righteousness for the attention of people, while inside their heart was far from God and full of unrighteousness (e.g., Matt. 15:7-9; 23:1-7, 28-29). They were trying to do what they thought were good things, but they were doing them for evil reasons. His anger burned against the hardness of heart in the legalistic Pharisees (Mark 3:5), against officials who had turned the temple into a robber's den (Mark 11:15-18), and against the scribes and Pharisees who were leading the people to destruction by their traditions (Matt. 23:13-28). In the Old Testament God declared to Israel, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies" (Amos 5:21). The very activities that should have drawn the people closer to God had been turned into religious showmanship.

But I am afraid that we can fall into the same kind of hypocrisy, unless we learn to hate our own phoniness when approaching God. Do we pray and sing to be heard by people, or by God? Do we go through the motions of the Christian life to try to convince others of our godliness, or are we truly attempting to allow God to transform us from the inside to the outside? Do we enforce a strict moral standard with our children, but forget to allow God's love to permeate the relationship?

The antidote to our own religious hypocrisy is to be starkly honest with ourselves before God and learn to live a life of love. As Paul says, all religious activity, whether it is speaking with tongues of men and angels, or using a gift of prophecy, or giving all we own to the poor, means absolutely nothing without love (1 Cor. 13:1-3). If we truly love Jesus, we will hate the cancer of religious hypocrisy that can slowly pervade our church life and personal devotion.

"Love, and Do What Thou Wilt"

Many of us may be quite uncomfortable thinking of Jesus hating something. Hate is a very strong word. But I am convinced that the more we love what is good and true and righteous, the more we will learn to hate what is evil, and false, and wicked. This will become increasingly more difficult in our society, because we have seen such a blurring of the line between good and evil. The world increasingly loves what God says is wicked, and hates what God says is good.

The Psalmist's instruction is helpful here: "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psa. 37:4). This is basically equivalent to Augustine's well-known saying, "Love, and do what thou wilt."² This may be one of the most important guidelines for all of the decisions of our lives, big and small, because if we truly love God we will not do anything that goes contrary to his Word and will for us. The more clearly we love Jesus, the more we will give ourselves to Him and His will for us—heart, soul, mind, and strength. And when we live in the purity and beauty of His love, the more we will naturally hate evil and reject it wholly from our lives. Perhaps the greatest single gift that you and I can give to this world that is held in the grip of evil is to hate evil by living a life that is an example of unqualified love for Jesus.

Endnotes

1. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 90.

2. "Love, and do what thou wilt." Augustine, *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, VII. 8; Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, I. vii, 504.

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