

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Hate Evil

Proverbs 8:1-16

A couple of years ago, Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf wrote a book titled *Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet*. They focus on how the anonymity of the internet has emboldened so many individuals and organizations to spew hateful vitriol against others, in the form of lies, bullying, conspiracy theories, bigoted and racist rants, and even calls for violence. As the authors put it: "Links, viral emails, and 're-tweets' enable lies to self-propagate with appalling speed. Hate begets hate, and its widespread appearance makes it seem increasingly acceptable and normal in a world where traditional standards of honesty, tolerance, and civility are rapidly deteriorating."¹

Civility is deteriorating. Hate begets hate. We now have terms like "hate speech," "hate crimes," "hate violence," and "hate groups." Some even speak of hate as a contagion. They describe it as a dangerous and threatening atmosphere in which we're struggling to live out our commitments to what we believe is good and right and true. It's no wonder that in our present cultural environment, one of the most frequently heard defenses is, "I'm not a hater." Unless, of course, you're hating the haters, which might be interpreted as a positive thing.

In this type of atmosphere, where we're trying to tone things down, we might be reluctant to rush into Bible passages that use the language of hatred, and even endorse a certain kind of hatred. But there's no such reservation in today's text from Proverbs. "I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion. To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech" (vv. 12-13). "To fear the Lord is to hate evil." This resonates with other texts like Psalm 97:10: "Let those who love the Lord hate evil, for he guards the lives of his faithful ones and delivers them from the hand of the wicked." Or Paul's exhortation in today's reading from Romans: "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (12:9).

So in the Christian life, there's a legitimate place for hatred, when it's directed against things that resist and oppose the nature and will of God. According to our passage from Proverbs, hating evil is an essential part of what it means to possess wisdom. Here in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman, taking her stand in public, offering a loud and clear invitation to hear and receive instruction. And this instruction, we're told, is inseparable from practical matters of right and wrong. Wisdom isn't primarily a matter of just possessing a theoretical understanding of things. It's more about how to apply that understanding and knowledge to the specific circumstances and choices of daily life. It's about being able to distinguish right from wrong, and to do what is right.

This means that those who want to pursue righteousness and justice and peace cannot do so without wisdom. This is especially true for those in places of power and authority. In our text, Wisdom is portrayed as an advisor to those who govern. She shows up in the courts of the high and the mighty. "Counsel and sound judgment are mine. I have understanding and power. By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule the earth" (vv. 14-16). As an advisor to those who hold the reins of power, Wisdom sets the standards and norms for government. That's why

she says, in v. 13, that "I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech." Wisdom knows that those in power are prone to these kinds of attitudes and behavior.

And yet, when it comes to addressing what's wrong in the world, and setting things right, don't we still look to those who govern? One of the reasons we pray for them, communicate with them, praise them, criticize them, give money to them, and vote for them, is because we still believe that they're in a position to make righteousness and peace more of a reality here on this planet. No matter how cynical or hardened we may have grown about the political process, we still hold on to the belief that those who govern possess authority, power, and resources that can help turn back evil, reduce suffering, and establish more of the good that we believe God intends for life in human society. In other words, we still believe that God hates all the forms of evil that corrupt and destroy his world, and that the governing authorities in this world have a crucial part to play in God's just and righteous purposes.

In most cases where the Bible speaks of God as "hating," it's because the Bible is describing God's opposition to attitudes and actions that are contrary to who he is, who he intends us to be, and what he intends the world to be. According to the Scriptures, love, not hate, is God's most fundamental attitude toward us, and toward his world. But this doesn't mean that God is unmoved or untouched by human rebellion and disobedience. God's reaction to human sin is a sign of God's holiness. And when the Bible speaks of God as "hating," it's usually got something to do with God remaining holy, and expecting holiness in the life of his people.

You see, when it comes to God, holiness and love go together. God isn't holy and hateful at certain times, and then loving at other times. Being holy and being love aren't two parts of God that compete with one another to see which one will win out in a particular situation. God is loving at all times. But his love is a holy love, which means that his anger or wrath springs from his desire to save us from the things that separate us from him. As Miroslav Wolf puts it, "God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love."²

In our text, Wisdom says, "To fear the Lord is to hate evil." That phrase "fear the Lord" takes us back to the opening chapter of Proverbs, where we hear the theme statement, the motto, for the whole book: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (1:7). To "fear the Lord" is to acknowledge that the sovereign, loving God alone holds the world and all its outcomes in his hands. To "fear the Lord" is to recognize God's total claim upon our lives, and to make a total life-response of giving ourselves to him. To "fear the Lord" is to live humbly in service of God and according to God's ways for us. To "fear the Lord" is to will what God wills and to want what God wants, for our lives and for the world. This is what it means to live wisely.

It's only follows, then, that Wisdom says, "To fear the Lord is to hate evil." If the righteousness and justice that God intends are what we his people intend, then we, like God, will hate the things that oppose God's purposes for us. If the reconciliation and restoration that God desires are what we his people desire, then we, like God, will hate the things that destroy peace and separate us from God and from one another. If the healing and life that God wills are what we his people will, then we, like God, will hate the things that harm, hurt, and destroy. In these ways, we will love what God loves, and hate what God hates.

But note carefully that God does not hate us as people, and does not hate particular groups of people. Sometimes we let our own attitude toward others, particularly those with whom we disagree, distort our understanding of God. As author Anne Lamott has put it, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all

the same people you do.”³ It’s true that God opposes the sinfulness in our lives. It’s true that he stands against the things that we do to one another and to the world that he has made. It’s true that he disapproves of the ways we violate his will for our lives and for humanity as a whole. But that doesn’t mean that God hates us, that God hates people. He wants us to know that he takes sin seriously and that he disapproves of our actions, but that he still loves us and values us as his creation, and that his purpose is to save us and make us new in Christ.

From a human standpoint, we sometimes try to capture this perspective with the well-worn statement, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” In general, I understand the theology and the thinking behind it. It does capture, in a broad sense, God’s way of relating to us, and shows us that God’s purposes for us are fundamentally grounded in love, mercy, and compassion. But not everybody who hears that statement hears it as an expression of compassion. And the statement itself doesn’t apply evenly and equally in every kind of context, with every kind of person. In some settings, even though we may say, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” to some people the word “hate” will stand out more than the word “love.” So we need to be wise and discerning about how we express ourselves to others when we have disagreements about behavior, on all kinds of issues.

Maybe we can gain some wisdom from Christian comedian Mark Lowry, who has his own take on the matter. He says, “Love the sinner, hate the sin? How about: Love the sinner, hate your own sin! I don’t have time to hate your sin. There are too many of you! Hating my sin is a full-time job. . . . How about you hate your sin, I’ll hate my sin and let’s just love each other!”

Lowry is right that we need to pay our most fervent attention to our own sins. It’s one thing to decry the evil that exists in the world, and to hate the things that denigrate the poor, divide humanity, and destroy the creation. Those are certainly things that demand our zeal and our action. But it’s another thing to search our own hearts and minds, our own personal lives, to see the things we do that offend against God and against others, violating his holy will and purpose for us. The pride, the arrogance, the self-righteousness, the self-centeredness, the lust, the greed, the gluttony, the violence, the destructive speech, the indifference, the cruelty, the envy, the strife, and on the list could go. Are you and I as zealous about hating these evils that we have in our own lives?

“To fear the Lord is to hate evil.” That applies not only in the halls of power and among the nations of the world, but in the sacred space of your own personal life, and my own personal life. Remember that because God is continually at work, ridding us of unrighteousness and restoring the image of Christ in us, we need to continually learn more about hating our sins, turning away from them, and turning toward the Lord.

Richard Baxter, one of the great English pastors and theologians, once wrote a piece called “Directions for Hating Sin.” One of the keys, he says, is to “Consider well of the office, the bloodshed, and the holy life of Christ.” Baxter goes on, “His office is to expiate sin, and to destroy it. His blood was shed for it: his life condemned it. Love Christ, and you will hate that which caused his death. Love him, and you will love to be made like him, and hate that which is so contrary to Christ. These two great lights will show you the odiousness of darkness.” Today, as we give our lives to God and come to Christ’s table, may he move us even further out of the darkness of sin and into the light of his love.

¹ Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf, *Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 10-11.

² Quoted in Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) 42.

³ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Pantheon, 1994) n.p.