

“We Should Love People, Not Try To Change Their Beliefs: Half-Truth #4”

Pastor Dan Erickson

June 13, 2021

This morning, as we continue our series on “Harmful Half-truths,” the statement we will consider is this: “We should love people, not try to change their beliefs.” Behind that statement is the idea that we should focus on being kind toward others, and respect people’s right to believe whatever they want, especially when it comes to religion. Well, this morning we will explore how, yes, we should indeed love people, that is true. Period. Yet, part of love often includes encouraging people to change their beliefs. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would help us to hear and heed His truth today.

We should love people, even if they have different beliefs than we do. This is pretty basic. To love another person is to be concerned about his/her wellbeing. If I love someone, I want to speak and act in a way that benefits that person. Now, what we call love in our culture doesn’t quite fit that definition. Often our need for another person, a desire to have that individual serve our wellbeing, is labeled love. The bottom line, however, is that Christians, followers of Jesus, are to love other people in the same way as we love ourselves. Jesus says that is the great commandment number 2. **Matthew 22:39 Love your neighbor as yourself.** And Jesus uses the term for more than folks who live on the same block as you do. It includes more than just your circle of friends and family members. **Matthew 5:43, 44 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.**

Who are your enemies? It might be a neighbor whose dog is always doing stuff on your lawn, and refuses, despite complaints, to do anything about it. It could be your brother-in-law, who owes you several thousand dollars, but keeps asking to borrow money. It might be that gal at church, who has repeatedly spread false rumors about you, because she is jealous of you. Or it might be someone who you don’t like, but you can’t really remember why. Those are all reason you might have an enemy. In recent years, it seems that more and more, our enemies are those who disagree with us. Especially on political, social or religious issues. As an evangelical Christian, my enemies might include atheists, Muslims, LGBT

activists, abortion rights advocates, or liberal Episcopalians. Now, I think, that previous generations might have found our definition of “enemy” amusing. Compared to having a German or Japanese soldier firing a machine gun at you, or a Soviet dictator promising to bury us or terrorist hijacker crashing an airplane into a 110-story building, the people we consider our enemies are fairly innocuous.

Now, my point is we are to love people with whom we disagree, who have wrong opinions, even if we consider them our enemies. How do we love them? As we love ourselves. We treat them as we would like to be treated. We engage in conversation. We listen to their perspective. We avoid harsh words. We are concerned about them as persons, as individuals, for example, Bill and Patty are your neighbors. The claim to be atheists. They are not married, but living together. They are kind of 21st century hippies. Neither of them has a full time job. They are radical environmentalists and are both active in the Legalize Marijuana Now party. Bill and Patty detest Christians, especially evangelicals, because they think Christians hate them. You never really interact with them even though they have lived just two houses down from you for the past three years. But then you learn Patty has cancer. You decide to bring a meal over to their house. A relationship develops quickly. You find they like to garden, just like you do. (We are talking about flowers and vegetables, not marijuana.) Two week later, Bill asks if you would take them to Patty’s doctor appointment in Duluth because the old car they have is not running right now. You are glad to do that. And soon Bill and Patty are not your enemies, but your friends.

And the Lord Jesus is pleased. You are beginning to love your neighbor as yourself. And many folks think this is how things should remain. You believe in God, they don’t. You believe in a lot of things, that they don’t and the best thing is to be kind, help out Bill and Patty when you can, and don’t try to alter who they are. Just love them, accept them, don’t try to change their beliefs. And as a Christian, the love and concern is all the testimony you need to give. By showing kindness, you are showing them that god is real. Well, friends, if I thought that was true, the sermon

could end here. But I don't think it is true. Yes, we should love people who have different beliefs than we do, but if we are truly concerned about their well-being, there will be times when we very much want them to change their beliefs and will do what we can to make that happen.

A modern myth is that if you love someone, you will approve of their choices, of their beliefs and their behavior. Really? Anyone who is a parent knows that your love for your children prevents you from always approving of their choices. It would be easier if you didn't love them so much. When your 10-year old asks for donuts and ice cream for dinner, the loving parent says, "Of course dear, if that is what you want." No! The loving thing is to say, "You're going to eat chicken and broccoli like the rest of us." It's love that prevents you from letting your child eat whatever he/she wants to eat. Things change a bit when your children are 25 or 45 years old, but love still compels a parent to more than nod in approval sometimes. "Dad, we have maxed out the credit cards with all the new furniture and stuff we have been buying for our house. I just need to borrow a couple of thousand dollars from you for this vacation we want to take to Colorado this summer." Would the loving father say, "Sure, let me get the checkbook?" Or would he say, "What are you doing? You cannot be spending money like that. You need to vacation at Side Lake this summer, not Colorado."

Friends, when we care about people, about their well-being, we would encourage them to make good choices, and if they are making bad choices we would admonish them to make different choices. Here are just three of the many bible verses that tell us to do this:

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and *admonishing one another* in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your heart to God. Or

Hebrews 3:13 But *exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.* Or

Romans 15:14 the apostle Paul says, **I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.**

Admonish, exhort, instruct, all refer to the same thing. You encourage people you care about to

believe and behave differently than they do now. You want them to change.

Now, frankly, the verses I read and most other passages in the New Testament refer to admonishing other Christians. And it is through that we have more freedom to do that within the body of Christ. However, if we care about people who are not believers, we would admonish them as well. So, what should you do with your neighbors, Bill and Patty? Well, you might chat with them about marriage. There are a couple of things involved. First, God is not pleased with their current relationship. Not that many years ago it was called "living in sin." They should be married, not just living together. Now, keep in mind, it is a dangerous thing to displease God. When we see a friend walking on such really thin ice, you want to warn them. However, in our culture it has become very difficult to do that with people who are not Christians, especially when the issue involves sexuality. There may not be any good way to bring you this topic that would make sense to Bill and Patty. However, there is another point with which they can connect. Getting married would bring more happiness to Bill and Patty. It would make their relationship a better one. There are all sorts of sociological data that you can reference, but in this case you might want to have a chat with Bill. Patty has cancer. Though they obviously care about each other, Bill has never pledged to be faithful to Patty "in sickness and in health." With what she is going through right now, that could be a real encouragement. Though often abused and misused, marriage is a gift that enables both believer and unbelievers to experience God's common grace.

Yet, Bill and Patty's big problem, really the only problem of ultimate significance, is that they don't know God. That means they are spiritually lost and face an eternity separated from God and all that is good in hell. Now, again, they claim to be atheists so, on the surface, they are a long way from faith in Jesus. The cancer, however, may be causing them to rethink some of their beliefs. As people are confronted by their mortality, atheism and the belief that there is nothing beyond the physical world becomes less and less attractive. The bottom line, however is that because you care about Bill and Patty, you have to talk to them about their need for Christ. Yes, our primary reason for evangelism, sharing the great news of

Jesus with other, should be a concern for the glory of God.

Psalm 96:3,4 for example, says, **Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods.**

Yet, certainly if we care about people, loving them to any degree, we want them to experience God's salvation. This attitude is reflected in what the apostle Paul writes in

2 Corinthians 5:20 therefore, we are **ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.**

One of the clearest explanations of why we need to tell people we love about Jesus was given a few years ago by Penn Jillette. He is a well-known magician and performer who is an atheist and quite outspoken about not believing in God. One evening a businessman sought out Jillette after a performance, gave him a bible and shared the gospel with him. Jillette said the man was trying to "proselytize," trying to convert him to Christianity. Yet, rather than being angry with the guy, he noted he admired him. He then said, "I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe there's a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward, I don't respect that. How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there's certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that."

So, friends, what do you think? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? The reality is that if you truly care about Bill and Patty you are willing to share the hard truth with them, truth they need to hear, but may not want to hear. Most important of all, they need to hear the gospel, need to hear they are sinners who need a savior. They need to hear that Savior is Jesus, who through His life, death, and resurrection brings salvation to all who trust in Him! Friends, if you

love someone who is not a Christian, you want that person to change their beliefs, their beliefs about God, about Jesus, about the bible, and about salvation.

Now because we want people we love to change their minds about these things, because we believe it is important that they do so, we want to do our best to encourage and help them to do that. Ultimately, what enables people to change their minds about spiritual truth and embrace that truth is the Holy Spirit. However, the spirit does use our words and our actions to do that. Thus, what we say to people, how we speak to people makes a difference. So, if you care about Bill and Patty, if you want them to experience God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, you probably are not going to start calling them at 2:00 in the morning and yell, "Believe in Jesus or you will burn in hell." Yet, sometimes it seems we are content to just tell people they are wrong. "Bill, I cannot believe you are an atheist! You should believe in God. If you don't believe in God, you are a fool." Folks, those statements are true. But, I don't think this is how the Lord wants us to represent Him, or the gospel, to the people around us. As ambassadors of Jesus Christ, our goal is not just to proclaim the gospel, but persuade people to embrace it. Describing his ministry, the apostle Paul says,

2 Corinthians 5:11a Therefore, knowing the **fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others.**

And Paul was very diligent in this effort, willing to do whatever he could to persuade others to trust and follow Jesus. Listen to what he says in

1 Corinthians 9:19,22,23 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

This indicates Paul was very intentional, persistent and creative in his efforts to persuade other to turn to the Lord. If we truly care about others, we should seek to do the same.

Now, the specific approach we should take will depend on whom we are trying to persuade to change their mind and believe in Jesus. Our conversations with an atheist will be different than conversations we have with a Muslim, which would be different than conversations we have with a new-ager who believe in "the cosmic

Christ,” which is different than conversations we have with a liberal Episcopalian who think Jesus was merely a good man. There are a few things, however, that we need to keep in mind about effective persuasion in every situation.

Number 1 – Our confidence in the Lord enable us to remain calm even as we feel a sense of urgency that people we care about are not trusting in Jesus. Here are some verses that the apostle Paul wrote that I think every 21st century Christian should memorize or write on a note card and post on the fridge.

2 Timothy 2:24-26 **And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the rap of the devil. Who has taken them captive to do his will.**

Number 2 – We persuade other most effectively through a combination of words and deeds. Actions that show our love, that demonstrate that we truly care about another person are very important if we want people to listen to truth that we share with them. As Teddy Roosevelt once said, “People don’t care about how much you know, until they know how much you care.” That is often the case. Treating others with love and kindness tends to “adorn the gospel,” making it more attractive to people we are trying to persuade. Yet, we need to realize that we will always need to use words if we want to persuade others to trust in Jesus Christ. You may be a very kind and generous person. That is great. Many people may admire you. But, all you are really communicating is that you are a kind and generous person. A few people may assume you’re religious, because religious people are often kind and generous. They may think you are a Mormon. They would not, however, be persuaded that they are a sinner who needs a savior, and that Jesus, and only Jesus, is that savior, unless you use words to tell them that. Face to face conversation, a phone call, a text message or an old-fashioned letter can all be used, but you need to use words to persuade. Now, sometime you can use a third party. “Bill, I want you to read this book by Lee Strobel.” Or “Patty, why don’t you come to church with me this Sunday, I think you would be interested in what

my Pastor has to say.” However you do it, what Paul says in **Romans 10:13,14** is still true. **Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard. And how are they to hear without someone preaching?** If you care about someone who is not a Christian, you should want to tell that person about Jesus.

Number 3 – We would likely be most effective in persuading other to trust in the Lord Jesus if we ask good questions and listen to what others have to say. That is not really rocket science. Being intentional about doing so and using some common sense will take you a long way in this effort. However, there are three books I highly recommend that can help you ask good questions and really are excellent guides for being an effective, persuasive, ambassador for Jesus Christ. They are listed on the outline: “Questioning Evangelism” By Randy Newman; “Tactics” by Greg Koukl; and “Telling a Better Story” by Joshua Chatraw. Any one of those books would help you think more clearly about communicating the gospel, and would enable you to be more effective in helping people you care about change their minds and hearts about Jesus.

Friends, if you really love someone, you want them to embrace the truth, especially the truth about Jesus Christ. Mya the Lord enable us to be more and more effective in persuading those we love to place their trust in Him.