Does God “hate” sinners?

I believe that it is critical to think carefully about any attitude that we are going to claim God has toward people. We are then literally speaking on God’s behalf and have an enormous responsibility to represent Him with thoughtfulness and wisdom. I believe it is untrue and unwise to say that God “hates” sinners. What follows are my thoughts concerning this.

# What do we mean when we say “hate”?

So does God hate sinners? A simple Webster’s definition tells us that the word “hate” means to have an “extreme dislike”, “hatred”, or “aversion”. Let’s take a second to think about how we use the word “hate” through several examples. First, let us consider the statement “I hate vegetables”. What we usually mean by this is that we hate the taste, the experience of vegetables when we eat them. There is nothing intrinsically hateful about vegetables. Here is another example, “I hate my mom”. This is a much more complex statement. Typically this is a temporary statement of anger. Very rarely does someone actually hate their mom for their entire life. This statement is reactionary, typically due to an action. One may say, “I hate gossip”. This isn’t a person or an object; it is an action and experience. Again, this is usually a reaction to the experience of gossip in one’s life. One final, and perhaps extreme, example, “I hate Hitler”. For many, this is hated of the actions and the actual person based on their actions.

Therefore, there are many ways we can use the word “hate”. It can be toward an experience, it can be temporary, it can be of an intangible idea, and it can be of an actual person. The benefit we have as humans it that we fairly uniformly can understand the usage through our own personal experience and context. We easily understand the difference between hating vegetables and hating Hitler. A huge problem arises when we say that God “hates” anything. None of us can relate to his experience and context of hatred, we cannot easily place or understand his hatred. As we grow in Biblical understanding and intimacy with Jesus we have a better sense, but we must not assume this. Thus, due to the many different usages of the word “hate”, we should be very careful to tell Biblically illiterate and relationally distant people what or whom God “hates”.

# Biblical references to “hate”

If we are going to attempt to speak for God we must look at how God speaks. The word “hate” is used 174 times in the Bible (NASB). One hundred-thirty eight of these are in the Old Testament (OT),and 36 are in the New Testament (NT).

In the OT the word “sane’” [**שָׂנֵא**] is used for “hate”. It is a root word that ends up translated “hate” almost every time. In a few occurrences it is also used to communicate “enemy” or “foe”. It is almost always used of people hating each other or people hating God, this is the same in the NT. There are nine times that God is said to “hate”. Here they are six of them:

*Proverbs 6:16 “There are six things which the Lord hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him” (none of these are people themselves, but their actions)*

*Isaiah 1:14 “I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them.*

*Isaiah 61:8 For I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering; And I will faithfully give them their recompense And make an everlasting covenant with them.*

*Amos 5:21 “I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.*

*Malachi 2:16 “For I hate divorce,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the Lord of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”*

*Zechariah 8:17 ‘Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,’ declares the Lord.”*

So it is safe to say that God hates festivals that do not honor him, robbery, divorce, evil, and perjury. These are events and actions. Then there are three examples that we will examine in detail.

## Psalm 5:5

Psalm 5:5 states, “The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity.” This again is the same word “sane’”. God hates those who do iniquity. It is very clear. There is no distinction between believer or unbeliever, apparently God hates them both. If we take this literally, there is no hope for the boastful, or anyone who does iniquity, or sin. Yet, we know there is hope. Similarly the very next verse says, “You destroy those who speak falsehood” (Ps 5:6). So to continue to take this section literally, which is a rare exegetical method in the Psalms, forces us to expect liars to be destroyed, without exception. And the Hebrew word for “destroy” means to “kill, exterminate” [[1]](#footnote-1). Since we know this not to be true, we must understand Ps 5:5 figuratively. What is a more likely interpretation is “God hates when we sin”, not “God hates the actual sinner”. This seems to be what is in David’s mind as he continues to write, “But as for me, by Your abundant lovingkindness I will enter Your house, At Your holy temple I will bow in reverence for You” (Ps 5:7).

## Psalm 11:5

Psalm 11:5 states. “The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, And the one who loves violence His soul hates.” Once again if we are to take this verse literally, we must conclude that the Lord hates not everyone, but those who “love violence”.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the context of the entire Psalm the Psalmist, who is almost certainly David, a man known for sinful violence (Uriah), is uplifting the Lord’s holiness and that the upright will see his face.

## Hosea 9:15

Hosea 9:15 reads, “All their evil is at Gilgal; Indeed, I came to hate them there! Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of My house! I will love them no more; All their princes are rebels.” Again a truly literal interpretation forces us to conclude that the Lord hates Israel and that he will love them no more. This obviously conflicts with Hosea 3:1 which says, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.” The Lord is calling Hosea to love his prostitute wife, “even as the Lord loves the sons of Israel”. Even after Hosea 9:15, Hosea 14:4 goes on to state, “I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely, For My anger has turned away from them.”

So what do we make of Hosea 9:15 then? In Hosea the Lord says “I love the sons of Israel” (3:15), “I love them no more [Israel]” (9:15), and then “I will love them” (14:4). I think from this we then can interpret that Hosea 9:15 is talking about a temporary hate. The type of hate that is associated with a specific action, not a formal statement about that lasts forever. The introductory phrase, “All their evil is at Gilgal” helps us understand the verse this way. Gilgal was the scene of their first contumacy in rejecting God and choosing a king (1Sa 11:14, 15; compare 1Sa 8:7), and of their subsequent idolatry.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, it is best to interpret “hate” in this verse as a reaction to hating a specific sin, not hating the person.

## Conclusion on Biblical references to “hate”

As seen above, in all of the Biblical references to “hate”, we do not see even one example of God ever having an ongoing hate towards people. Therefore we must say it is unbiblical to state that God hates sinners. This type of language is not found in the Bible.

# Theology of Hate

Is love the antonym of hate? It depends on the type of hate you are referring to. I think you could say to your child, “I hate how you are acting right now” while still loving your child. I do not think you could actually hate your child and love them at the same time. There are not many people who hate and love Hitler at the same time. Can I hate my wife’ sin and not actually hate my wife? Yes.

It is hard to accept an ongoing hatred of people as sinners, which we all are (Rom 3:23, 1Jn 1:9-11), when there is such a strong case for an ongoing love of people as sinners. The first example starts in the beginning. We are all created in God’s image (Gen 1:28-29). Even after the fall, we are still made in God’s image. Can God hate his image bearers? I find this hard to accept. If God allows himself to hate people in their essence and nature, then in a way God hates himself.

There are also plenty of examples of God’s love of sinners. The easiest to recall example is John 3:16, “For God so loved the world…”. This includes everyone, the righteous and unrighteous. In fact Romans 8:38-39 tells us that, “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Could it be that even our sin cannot separate of from the love of God? Of course it cannot. In this same theme, Romans 5:8 says that, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

If these didactic examples are not enough, we see incredible examples of God’s love for sinners in the response of the father in the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Similarly as Jesus interacts with the Rich Young Ruler, the young ruler claims to have lived a spotless life and in the very moment where Jesus could have called him out, and is about to in the very next verse, where we might expect to see an attitude of “hatred” if we believed that is how God feels towards people, Mark 10:21 says, “Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him”. The evidence is overwhelming here and elsewhere that Jesus loves sinners. Jesus seemed to be most upset by the religious teachers weigh people down with burdens hard to bear (Lk 11:46).

# Wisdom on using the word “hate”

Hate is a very harsh word. Hearing the phrase “I hate you” is one of the most hurtful things anyone can ever hear in their life. Because of this we must exercise extreme caution using this word. Even if someone was to arrive at a different Biblical conclusion that the one I’ve reached, it is extremely unwise to use the word “hate” when talking about the Lord. When you use the word “hate” people tune out and become blind to anything you say after that. If I was to say, “As the reader of this paper, I hate you, but I am also glad you are reading it”, what you will remember is my hate, not my gladness.

Even if we still demand to tell people that God hates them, it likely leaves them with an unsolvable contradiction. How can anyone be hated and loved at the same time? There may be an explanation but it is not one that will resonate with their souls and hearts, mainly because this is not how God feels about them, but even more the contradiction is too acute.

One may reduce this “non-hate” position as a proponent of the “love the sinner, hate the sin” that is purported to be said by Gandhi. First, we must admit that there can be true statements even if they aren’t explicitly found in the Bible. For example 2+2=4 is not found in the Bible. Similarly the word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible but the support is certainly there for what we call the Trinity! Stating that this phrase doesn’t appear in the Bible is simply a straw man approach to logic and truth. The underlying content must be evaluated. Does God love sinners? Yes. Does God hate sin? Yes. When we put the two phrases together it could imply that the sinner is not responsible for their sin. We are sinners by choice, by thought, and by our inherited nature. Any sentence or quote that infers otherwise is certainly unbiblical.

# Conclusion

From the analysis above I must conclude that it is neither biblical nor wise to say or believe that God “hates” sinners. This is not to undermine the theology of total depravity, we are certainly deprived and dead in our sins (Eph 2:1), even by nature were objects of wrath. These are all true statements that are the very words of God. In our acceptance of depravity we must draw a line between our falleness and being “hated” by God. For God does not “hate” sinners.

1. James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996), H6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word for violence is חָמָס (ḥāmās) which is translated violence or wrong. It can mean sinful violence. But it does not mean “sin”. The Psalmist is calling out violence, if he wanted to call out sin as a general term he would have used the word חָטָא (chata’). Ironically in modern Israel the extremist organization called Hamas (which is an acronym in Arabic) is known for its violence against Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, On Spine: Critical and Explanatory Commentary. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), Ho 9:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)