

# Identity Crisis in the Culture Church:

## Are Believers Sinners or Saints?

There is an identity crisis in our culture. Some men think they are women, and some women think they are men. This confusion over identity is bringing untold chaos into our culture. In 2022, USA Today<sup>1</sup> named a man as one of the *Women of the Year* nominees. The same week, CNN<sup>2</sup> announced that a man was awarded the NCAA Championship in the women's 500-yard freestyle swimming event.

As shocking as this seems, we should not be caught off guard. Our society does not know God. Without God as the foundation, the result is confusion, even over things as basic as knowing that men are men and women are women. Yet there is NO confusion in God's Word. **Genesis 1:27, So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.**

This identity crisis is clear evidence of a godless culture. Unless we return to the Word of God as our foundation, godlessness, and confusion will only continue to increase. It has long been said, "He who defines the terms wins the argument." At this time in America, important terms are being redefined, and those who are doing this "redefining" appear to be winning the argument. The terms "marriage" and "gender" are both being redefined. The Bible always speaks of marriage as being between one man and one woman. In modern dictionaries, however, marriage is now defined to allow for the union of any "two parties" or even "two or more parties." Also, a man or a woman who identifies as another gender is called "transgender."

God created male and female according to **Genesis 1:27. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."** To join the terms "same-sex" and "marriage" or to use the term "transgender" is only to advance the cause of such ideas. Rather, Christians should stand firm on the Word of God and refuse even to acknowledge such terminology. When two men or two women receive a license to unite together, it is not marriage; it is immorality. As believers, we

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<sup>1</sup> USA Today - <https://tinyurl.com/2ex3dr7k>

<sup>2</sup> CNN - <https://tinyurl.com/5n6enuk4>

should not yield an inch regarding the definition of Biblical terms. When God has spoken, that is the final word.

Regardless of what the Supreme Court and our society decide, marriage remains between one man and one woman. A person's gender is determined at birth, either male or female. These are important issues in our day, and we must stand boldly for the truth God has made known in His Word. The prophet Isaiah gives a severe warning to those who would redefine words and call what is "evil" "good." The Prophet writes in **Isaiah 5:20**, **"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"**

When it comes to our society and government, believers stand firmly for the truth of God's Word. They do not compromise the meaning of such terms as marriage, male, or female. They see plainly that to do so is to begin the slippery slope to even more confusion. In the same way, Christians must not change the meaning of words God has clearly defined regarding our identity in Christ. Many have unwittingly yielded to the practice of redefining terms.

This booklet will examine two of these terms, ***sinners*** and ***saints***. The goal is to help Christians understand their true identity in Christ. Sadly, there is an identity crisis in the church today. Christians do not understand who they really are and how God describes them in His Word.

As Christians, we must always stand for the Word of God, taken in context, on any given issue. It is crucial that every Christian study the Word of God for themselves rather than simply taking what they hear as truth. We must approach any issues carefully and recognize that there is **"no new thing under the sun"** (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

### DEFINITION OF "SINNER"

Let us consider the word "sinner." Most people, both in our society and in the churches, define a "sinner" as "one who sins." If you go to one of the online dictionaries, such as [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), the definition of a sinner is "a person who sins."<sup>3</sup> We must ask whether that definition contradicts the Bible's meaning when it uses the word "sinner." We cannot be too careful when it comes to studying and understanding the Word of God.

According to Thayer's Greek Lexicon<sup>4</sup>, a sinner is defined as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Dictionary.com - <https://tinyurl.com/bdev3744>

<sup>4</sup> Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Joseph Thayer, Baker Publishing Group, January 1971

- 1) Devoted to sin, a sinner
  - 1a) not free from sin
  - 1b) pre-eminently sinful, especially wicked

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament<sup>5</sup> defines a sinner with these words:

The sinner is the man who does not allow God supreme authority over his life and who withholds from Him total dedication and obedience...

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia<sup>6</sup> lists the word for “sinner” as the Greek word “hamartolos,” which means “devoted to sin” or “erring one.”

According to the Dictionary of Bible Themes<sup>7</sup>, “The term tends to be used in particular of those regarded as outside God’s covenant of grace, whose sins are therefore not forgiven.”

The original Webster’s Dictionary, the Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary<sup>8</sup>, often uses Biblical examples and verses for its definitions. Under the word “sinner,” we see this definition:

“It is used in contradistinction to saint, to denote an unregenerate person; one who has not received the pardon of his sins.”

These definitions reveal that a sinner is not simply “one who sins” but one who is “devoted to sin.” A sinner is one who has not been set free from sin’s dominion or power in their life (**Romans 6:14**). Jesus clarifies the issue when he says in **John 8:34**, “**Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.**” While it is true that Christians may at times sin, Christians no longer practice sin or make it a manner of life. Christians are no longer SLAVES to sin. This is consistent with the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 6. Paul writes in **Romans 6:22**, **But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God...**”.

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<sup>5</sup>Gerhard Kittle, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 10th edition) 1977.

<sup>6</sup> International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, <https://tinyurl.com/yc27u6yf>

<sup>7</sup> Dictionary of Bible Themes, by Martin H Manser, Book Baby, April 1, 1996

<sup>8</sup> Websters Dictionary 1828, <https://tinyurl.com/4pzach6j>

## DEFINITION OF “SAINT”

In contrast to the word “sinner” in the Bible, the word to describe a true believer in both the Old and New Testament is the word “saint.” The word “saint” is taken from the Greek word “hagios” which means “holy” or “consecrated.” The word describes someone or something that is holy or “set apart” from that which is common or ordinary. We call the Bible the “Holy Bible” because it is unlike any common book. Jerusalem is called the “Holy City” because God distinguishes it from all other cities. In like manner, Old Testament believers and New Testament Christians are called “saints” throughout the Bible.

Thayer’s Greek Lexicon<sup>9</sup> defines a “saint” as a “most holy thing.” According to Easton’s Bible Dictionary<sup>10</sup>, a saint is “one separated from the world and consecrated to God; one holy by profession and by covenant; a believer in Christ.”

Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary<sup>11</sup> defines a saint with these words, “A person sanctified; a holy or godly person; one eminent for piety and virtue.”

The words “saints” or “saint” are used between 82-101 times in the Bible, depending on which translation you use. Consider just a few of the uses of the word “saints” in the Bible.

**Psalms 16:15** Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his **saints**.

**Psalms 145:10** All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your **saints** shall bless you!

**Romans 1:7** To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be **saints**: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Without exception, the Bible calls believers “saints” in the Old and New Testaments. Before conversion, every person is born a sinner and is enslaved to sin. It is the work of God whereby he changes a person from being enslaved or devoted to their sin (a sinner) into a holy person (a saint), one who is set free from sin. This is the regenerating work of God. This is not anything a man

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<sup>9</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Joseph Thayer, Baker Publishing Group, January 1971

<sup>10</sup> Easton, Matthew George, ed. Easton's Bible Dictionary. 3rd ed. N.p., 1897

<sup>11</sup> Websters Dictionary 1828, <https://tinyurl.com/43k88s8w>

can merit by his own works. Rather, God himself changes someone from a sinner to a saint. This is accomplished through justification, regeneration, and sanctification. Justification is the act of God whereby a sinner is declared “not guilty” by God. Regeneration is where a sinner is “born again” and becomes a new creation. Sanctification is the work of God (a two-step process) whereby God first sets us apart and calls us saints and then continues this process of sanctification throughout this life to make us more holy. A Christian is a saint who is becoming more saintly.

To summarize, a saint is what God calls those who genuinely believe in God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Sinners are those who are slaves of sin, those who have never been “born again” and set free from sin’s dominion and power. As we will see, there is an important distinction in the Bible between a sinner

### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

- 1) Have you ever thought about the definition of “saint” and “sinner” in this way before? In the past, how would you have defined these words?
- 2) Have you ever considered the Bible’s teaching that a Christian is one who has been changed from a slave a sin to a slave of righteousness?
- 3) Do you see yourself as enslaved to sin’s power or set free from sin’s power? Why?

and a saint. A distinction God makes is not something that we should overlook when describing a believer.

### **TWO MEN, TWO INTERPRETATIONS**

There can be no question that God uses men to explain and clarify the truth. Men can also confuse the truth. Even well-intentioned men oftentimes confuse and even mislead others with regard to the truth. It is crucial that we base our beliefs on the Word of God rather than men. For this study, I will share the views of two men, both of whom are highly respected in certain religious groups. Consider what these men have to say and compare their teachings with the Word of God.

Martin Luther was a Catholic monk who later became a key figure in the Protestant Reformation. Luther stood on the doctrine of “justification by faith alone” and was eventually excommunicated by the Roman Catholic church. A famous quote of Luther’s which is still held up in the religious world is based on the Latin phrase “Simul Justus et peccator.” This literally means “simultaneously justified (righteous) and sinner.” While many highly regard Luther, we must still consider and compare his statement in its context and

with Scripture. The question must be asked, does Luther's statement measure up to the Word of God?

Here is Luther's statement in its immediate context.

Thus a Christian person is righteous and a sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God.

From Luther's statements, we see that he considers a Christian both a friend AND an enemy of God. Such language is not only illogical in the plainest sense but also extremely anti-biblical. To say that a Christian is both holy AND profane is equally contrary to the Word of God. The word "profane" is defined in Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary<sup>12</sup> with such definitions as "irreverent to anything sacred," "proceeding from a contempt of sacred things," and "polluted; not pure." Luther's blending of opposing ideas in believers is not found anywhere in Scripture. The truth is, a Christian is a saint, a friend of God, and holy.

In contrast to Martin Luther, John MacArthur is a teacher of God's Word who has pastored the same church for over 50 years. He offers these comments in his study Bible notes on **James 4:8, ...Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.** MacArthur explains the word sinners as "a term used only for unbelievers."<sup>13</sup>

In his sermon Drawing Near To God from **James 4:7-10**, MacArthur says this regarding the word sinner:

Let's look at the word "sinners." You see it there in verse 8? "Cleanse your hands, you sinners." Let me do a little bit of a study of that word for you just so you get your feet on the ground as to who he's talking about if you still have any doubts. The word *hamartloi*, the word for sinners, is used in the gospels, and not only in the gospels, but it's used predominantly in the gospels of the New Testament to refer to the hardened sinner, the one who openly disregards the law of God, the one who had a reputation for public immorality.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Websters Dictionary 1828, <https://tinyurl.com/mrtjmmb4>

<sup>13</sup> MacArthur Study Bible, Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 1932

<sup>14</sup> Drawing Near To God, John MacArthur, <https://tinyurl.com/mrxtzhjsj>

Again, in his Study Bible notes on **James 5:20**, MacArthur states this regarding the term “sinner”: “A word used to describe the unregenerate.”<sup>15</sup> In his sermon, [Saving A Soul From Death](#), MacArthur speaks in no uncertain terms. He says, “This term “sinner” is used – listen to this – only of the unregenerate. It is used in Scripture only of an unbeliever.” He also says, “You come into the New Testament; you find the word is always used with reference to those who are outside the kingdom of God.” Finally, he says, “a sinner cannot be a Christian. While a Christian may sin, he’ll never be characterized as a sinner.”<sup>16</sup>

MacArthur is very clear concerning the meaning of the word “sinner.” There is no uncertainty regarding who is a sinner in his definition. More importantly, the Biblical definition (as seen above) and the whole of Scripture are equally clear. A sinner is *always* an unbeliever in the Scriptures. Many believers call themselves “sinners saved by grace.” Believers are **never** called “sinners” in the Bible. The goal of this booklet is to promote carefulness in our study of God’s Word and in our speech. We should want to view things as God views them and describe things as God describes them.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- 1) Have you ever heard this idea before that, as a Christian, you are both “an enemy of God and a child of God” at the same time?
- 2) As a Christian, do you consider yourself a “profane” person?
- 3) Can you find any passage in the Bible that refers to Christians as “sinners saved by grace”?

### BIBLICAL CONTEXT OF THE WORD “SINNER”

We cannot base our understanding of the Bible solely on the definition of words. Rather, we must be careful to understand the context of words and verses as well. The context includes not only the chapter but the whole book, as well as the entirety of the Bible.

To ensure we understand what the word “sinner” actually means, consider the following. The word “sinner” is used 21 times in the Bible, and the word “sinners” is used 46 times. Below are a few of the references to help us understand how the word is used in the Bible.

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<sup>15</sup> MacArthur Study Bible, Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 1935

<sup>16</sup> [Saving A Soul From Death](#), John MacArthur, <https://tinyurl.com/yc3draap>

**Psalm 1:1** Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of **sinner**s, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

**Psalm 104:35** Let **sinner**s be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more! Bless the LORD, O my soul! Praise the LORD!

**Luke 15:1** Now the tax collectors and **sinner**s were all drawing near to hear him.

**John 9:31** We know that God does not listen to **sinner**s, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.

**Hebrews 7:26** For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, **separated from sinner**s, and exalted above the heavens.

**1 Peter 4:18** If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the **sinner**?

These verses are just a small sampling to demonstrate how the word “sinner” is used in the Bible. Interestingly, the Scriptures put a correlation between the word “sinner” and the words “wicked” or “ungodly.” Throughout the Old and New Testaments, these words (“sinner,” “wicked,” and “ungodly”) are used together to describe people who are not genuine believers in God or Christ.

In the book of Proverbs, the words “sinner” or “sinner

s” are contrasted with the word “righteous,” showing once again that “sinners” is a description of an unbeliever, not a believer. Examine the following verses:

**Proverbs 11:31** If the **righteous** is repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the **sinner**!

**Proverbs 13:21** Disaster pursues **sinner**s, but the **righteous** are rewarded with good.

According to the Bible, there are only two groups of people in the world, those who are Christians and those who are not. We might refer to these two groups in various ways, such as the righteous and the wicked, the wise man and the fool, and believers and unbelievers.



In **Romans 6**, we see these two groups of people described with these terms, those who are “slaves of sin,” and those who, having been “set free from sin,” are now “slaves to righteousness.” Those are the only two groups of people in the world. You are either a “sinner” (a slave to sin) or a “saint” (a slave to righteousness). There are no other groups!

Let us now consider some verses from the Bible that show this teaching even more clearly. Consider the following passages from the book of Romans.

**Romans 5:6** For *while we were still weak*, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

**Romans 5:10** For if *while we were enemies* we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

**Romans 7:5-6** For *while we were living in the flesh*, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

Before a person becomes a Christian, they are “weak,” they are “enemies,” and they are “living in the flesh.” However, once they become Christians, they are changed. Christians are no longer weak; they are strong through Christ. They are no longer enemies; they are friends, reconciled to God by the life of Christ. They are no longer living in the flesh; they are released from the law, having died to that which held them captive.

Consider one final verse, taken from the same context as the verses above.

**Romans 5:8** ...but God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.

Notice that the same exact phrase (*while we were*) is used in each of the four verses listed above. These verses give a description of what every Christian used to be, before being born again by the Holy Spirit: we were weak, we were sinners, we were enemies, and we were living in the flesh. However, after salvation, Christians are no longer weak, no longer living in the flesh, no longer enemies, and no longer sinners. Paul shows us that believers are not what they used to be. Now they are strong in Christ! Now they are reconciled to God! Now they are living after the Spirit! Now they are saints! Praise God

for the wonderful work of Christ and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. It is no wonder the Apostle Paul declares us to be new creations when we are in Christ. We are no longer enslaved to sin and its dominion. Rather we are set free from sin's power and made alive to God in Christ. To God be the glory!

**2 Corinthians 5:17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

If God's Word makes it plain that we are no longer enemies of God, would a Christian ever want to refer to himself in the present as "an enemy of God"? And yet, this is what Luther said in his quote. If you heard a Christian describe himself by saying, "I *am* an enemy of God saved by grace," you would be confused. One might say, "I *was* an enemy of God, but now I *am* saved by grace." Likewise, for a Christian to say, "I *am only* a sinner saved by grace" is an unbiblical statement. Biblically speaking, a Christian could say, "I *was* a sinner, but now I *am* a saint saved by grace." Such a statement exalts the work of Christ in the life of the believer. If Paul told the Christians in Rome that they are **"called to be saints" (Romans 1:7)**, why would we still want to be called sinners?

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

An important point of consideration is how the use of the terms "sinners" and "saints" have changed through the years. The usage of these terms in church history is helpful in understanding our use of the terms today. According to the book Church History, written by Bruce L. Shelley, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, there arose a division between two prominent men, Novatian and Cornelius.

Novatian, known as an "anti-pope," defended the primitive concept that the church was to be considered a "society of saints." Cornelius, who was elected as pope in 251, advocated a new view that considered the church as a "school for sinners." This view became the popular view and was adhered to by those who followed pope Cornelius.

"Novatianists built up a network of small congregations that considered the catholic churches polluted as a result of their lenient attitude toward sinners."<sup>17</sup> Even today, the Roman Catholic church views saints as only those whom they declare to be saints after their death. To hold that a believer is still a sinner is a very Roman Catholic teaching that should be rejected by all

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<sup>17</sup> Church History, by Bruce L. Shelley, Thomas Nelson, 2012, p. 82.

who believe the Bible. Many who decry Roman Catholicism continue to adhere to one of its firmly held teachings, despite it's clear contradiction to the Word of God.

## OBJECTIONS TO THIS VIEW

### 1Timothy 1:15

While various reasons have been presented to show that believers are not sinners, it is important to consider any verses that appear to differ from this teaching. There are two primary verses often used to oppose this teaching. The most common objection to this teaching is found in **1 Timothy 1:15** where the Apostle Paul calls himself the “chief” of sinners (KJV) or the “foremost” of sinners (ESV).

The argument is made that Paul states this of himself using the present tense in the Greek, “I am,” not “I was.” At first glance, this seems like a valid argument. However, we must examine the context surrounding verse 15. Consider **1 Timothy 1:12-16**:

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This *is* a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting (KJV).

In examining the context, we find that Paul is magnifying the grace of God to save one who was so evil before he believed in Jesus Christ. Christ's saving power was not simply for Paul's benefit, but for all who would believe after Paul. By saving Paul, Jesus' power to save is magnified because Christ is shown to be able to save anyone. No one is beyond the reach of Christ's saving power.

The Greek word translated as “chief” or “foremost” is “protos,” which means “first in time or place.” The word “protos” is the root from which we get the word “prototype.” A prototype is defined as “an original or model on which

something is patterned,” or “someone or something that serves as a model or inspiration for those that come later.”<sup>18</sup>

Paul is set forth in this passage as the “prototype” of sinners, the model or pattern of Christ’s power to save. If Christ could save Paul, Christ can save anyone! In saving Paul, Jesus showed his patience toward Paul and now is setting him forth as a “pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” (v. 16). This is the sense in which Paul is the “foremost” or “chief” of sinners. This is why Paul uses the present tense, “*I am* chief.” Paul will always be the prototype of Christ’s saving power. Paul cannot be saying that he is the “worst” sinner in the present tense.

Albert Barnes writes these comments on **1 Timothy 1:16**:

It denotes a pattern or example, and here it means that the case of Paul was an example for the encouragement of sinners in all subsequent times.<sup>19</sup>

Matthew Henry comments on this verse:

The chief of sinners may become the chief of saints; so this apostle was, for he was not a whit behind the very chief apostles (**2 Cor. 11:5**), for Christ came to save the chief of sinners. It deserves to be received, to be believed by us all, for our comfort and encouragement. The mercy which Paul found with God, notwithstanding his great wickedness before his conversion, he speaks of, for the encouragement of others to repent and believe (v. 16). ...It was an instance of the long-suffering of Christ that he would bear so much with one who had been so very provoking; and it was designed for a pattern to all others, that the greatest sinners might not despair of mercy with God. Note here, First; our apostle was one of the first great sinners converted to Christianity. Secondly, He was converted, and obtained mercy, for the sake of others as well as of himself; he was a pattern to others. Thirdly, The Lord Jesus Christ shows great long-suffering in the conversion of great sinners.

By using the present tense (I am), Paul shows that he will always be the “pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.”

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<sup>18</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary, <https://tinyurl.com/yb5d5pww>

<sup>19</sup> Albert Barnes, Bible Hub, <https://tinyurl.com/ya2x7rr7>

This explains why Paul uses the present tense to describe himself as the “first” or “foremost” of sinners. This is quite different from saying that Paul remained the “worst” (NIV) of sinners, even after his conversion. If that was his meaning in this passage, why would he exhort the Corinthian church and the Philippian church to be “followers of me” (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Philippians 3:17)? To teach that Paul continued to be a great sinner misses the point that Paul is making in the text, that he is and always will be the example of how great a sinner Christ can save.

Consider what Paul said in **I Corinthians 15:9-10**:

For I am least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Notice that Paul says he is the “least of the apostles” and “unworthy to be called an apostle.” But look at the context of these phrases. He goes on to say it is “because I persecuted the church of God.” Paul’s descriptions of himself are again given in the context of his life before conversion. Notice how Paul describes himself in other letters to the churches. For example, in **2 Corinthians 11:5** Paul says:

For I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles. (NKJV)<sup>20</sup>

Again, in **2 Corinthians 12:11-12**, Paul describes himself in this way:

I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you; for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds. (KJV)

There is no doubt that Paul was a humble man. He considered himself undeserving to be an Apostle because of his former persecution of the church. But we also know that Paul wrote to the Roman believers and explained that as Christians, we are no longer “slaves of sin” (**Romans 6:17**). If Paul was presently the worst sinner of all men, then was he a “slave of sin”?

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<sup>20</sup> Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Consider these words from James Shelley, author of Clinging to a Counterfeit Cross. In chapter 10, "Saint or Sinner," Shelley says:

Many have argued that since Paul is speaking in the present tense he is humbly speaking of himself at the time. But is this what Paul is actually saying in this text? Are we to believe that Paul, by using the term "chief of sinners" was actually claiming that he saw himself, at the present time, as the most sinful man among all men? A greater sinner than Nero who was notorious for his despicable behavior? Did he see himself more sinful than any man in all of Rome, or even those Jews who took part in the death of Christ? A man walking in the Spirit more sinful than these at the present time! If this was his meaning his statement would not be one of humility but of lunacy. In truth, it would be an insult to the Spirit of God and a mockery of His inward work in the believer. No, he was certainly not claiming that he perceived himself, at the present time, a greater sinner than all other men, but he was, as the context reveals, referring to his past (v.13) before conversion. *"...although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief."* Paul's main point is found in v. 16 *"...I obtained mercy, that in me first Christ might show all longsuffering **as a pattern to those who are going to believe in Him for everlasting life.**"* (emphasis added). In other words, if Christ would be so merciful to save Paul, a persecutor of the Church, a blasphemer, an insolent man, the chief of sinners, he would be merciful to any man who turns to Him by faith. Paul is, in the present tense, the "chief of sinners" in that he ever remains the chief example of how exceedingly gracious God is in the salvation of the repentant sinner, irrespective of his past.<sup>21</sup>

### James 4:8

Another verse often used to show that Christians are "sinners" is **James 4:8**. **"Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."** A surface reading of this verse could lead one to conclude that James is exhorting Christians to "cleanse" and "purify" themselves. However, careful examination of this passage reveals something different. James is referencing

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<sup>21</sup> Clinging to a Counterfeit Cross, Copyright © 2012 by James P. Shelly, Published by Chronicles of Truth

the Psalms. Consider these words from **Psalm 24:3-4**. **Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.** David, the Psalmist, is asking these questions in reference to who a true worshipper of God is. Who is qualified to approach the Lord? Who is able to stand in God's holy place? The answer is clear. **"He who has clean hands and a pure heart."** This truth is similarly taught in Psalm 15 as well. David writes in **Psalm 15:1-2**, **O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart.** When James exhorts his hearers to "cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts you double-minded," he is actually calling them to repentance, not rededication. He goes on and urges them to **"humble yourselves before the Lord" (James 4:10)**. These calls to the wicked and unbelievers are seen throughout the book.

**James 4:4** You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

**James 5:1-6** Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

Although such an interpretation may seem to be contrary to long-held beliefs, consider the following comments by two well-respected commentators from days gone by. John Gill, an English pastor and theologian who lived from 1697-1771, describes the "sinner" in **James 4:8** with the following words.

...the persons addressed are not the profane men of the world, but sinners in Zion, formal professors, hypocritical persons; who speak with a double tongue to men, and who

draw nigh to God with their mouths, but not with their hearts; who halt between two opinions, and are unstable in all their ways...<sup>22</sup>

John Calvin, a French pastor, theologian, and reformer who lived from 1509-1564, expressed a similar thought regarding the “sinners” of **James 4:8**.

He here addresses all those who were alienated from God and he does not refer to two sorts of men, but he calls the same sinners and double-minded. Nor does he understand every kind of sinners, but the wicked and those of a corrupt life.<sup>23</sup>

John MacArthur, again in his sermon on **James 4:6-7**, gives clarity to what James is saying when he explains this section of Scripture.

Clearly, then, when you come to verse 7, this is an invitation to those people to come to saving faith...The invitation is directed at those who are not saved, those who are still captive to earthly, sensual, demonic wisdom, those who love the world and are the enemies of God, those who, in the terms of verse 5, still are governed by the inner spirit which lusts. In other words, they're driven by their fallenness. To those who, according to verse 6, are proud, not humble. Those who, to sum it up, are in desperate need of God's grace. And as I tried to point out to you last time, two weeks ago, this cannot refer to believers for believers are nowhere in Scripture ever called the enemies of God. Even Abraham back in chapter 2, verse 23, is called the friend of God.

The call James makes to his hearers for a “pure heart” aligns perfectly with the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus states plainly in **Matthew 5:8, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God**. Only those with pure hearts are the children of God.

Do you consider your heart to be wicked and deceitful even as one who professes faith in Christ? According to Jesus, only those with a pure heart will see God. The reader is encouraged to imitate the Bereans in **Acts 17:11** who “**received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.**”

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<sup>22</sup> John Gill's Commentary taken from James 4:8, ESword

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin's Commentary, Studylight.org - <https://tinyurl.com/mttv7kaf>



### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- 1) In light of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:8, will those with a wicked, deceitful heart see God?
- 2) Is it possible to have a good, honest, pure heart that is also wicked and deceitful?
- 3) If Paul meant that he was the worst sinner when he called himself the "chief of sinners" or "foremost of sinners," why would he tell people to follow his example in multiple New Testament verses?

### BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

One important rule of Bible interpretation is that we should never base a major teaching of Scripture on one verse of the Bible. Can those who claim that Paul is still the worst sinner in the world point to any other verse in the Bible to verify this claim?

Some might turn to Romans 7 to further their argument. However, to do so is only to argue against Paul in Romans 6 where he stated emphatically that as believers, we are **"freed from sin" (Romans 6:7)** and are **"dead to sin" (Romans 6:11)** and that **"sin will have no dominion over you..." (Romans 6:14)**. Paul says in **Romans 6:18, "Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness."** Again, in **Romans 6:22, But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God..."** For a fuller explanation of Romans 7, read Charles Leiter's book, [Justification and Regeneration](#).

The beautiful and freeing truth of the whole Bible is that Christians, although born in sin like all mankind, are rescued from that sin by Jesus Christ. By His great love and grace, Christians have been saved from sin. Jesus did exactly what the angel who appeared to Joseph said Jesus would do in **Matthew 1:21. "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."**

Why would Christians want to call themselves or other Christians "sinners" when the Bible consistently calls them "saints"? To do so is really to downplay the amazing work of Christ in salvation. Many who do this are sincere and have never studied the subject for themselves. This article is not intended to condemn but rather to instruct and challenge every Christian to examine these matters for themselves. If you have never done a word study on "saints" and "sinners" in the Bible, why not do that today?

## ARE BELIEVERS SINLESS?

To teach that believers are not sinners **is not** to say that believers do not sin. Sadly, believers do sin at times. To deny this is to reject the clear teaching of the Bible. However, a believer who sins differs from someone who is enslaved to sin. Paul wrote to the believers in the churches urging them on to holiness and the forsaking of sin. When a believer sins, it is inconsistent with who they are as Christians. It contradicts their very identity in Christ. It is contrary to the new man they have become. When believers view themselves as saints, they acknowledge the work of Christ in them. When we call others saints, we are magnifying the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit to change one who was dead in sin to one who is alive in Christ.

The Apostle John wrote to the believers in **1 John 2:1**, **“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.”** Notice that John does not say “when anyone does sin.” Rather he says, “if anyone does sin.” “When” implies that sinning is always going to be the case. “If” implies the possibility but not the necessity of sinning. “When” and “if” are two different mindsets. The teaching that Christians “will sin” and the teaching that Christians “can’t sin” are both errors.

Peter gives us a wonderful promise in **2 Peter 1:3-4**. **His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.** Believers have been given power through God’s great and precious promises to live godly lives. Rather than having the mindset that sin is just going to happen, we should cling to the promises of God and live according to Paul’s instruction in **Romans 6:11**. **So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

Paul further encourages us that we do not have to sin when he tells the Corinthian believers in **1 Corinthians 10:13**, **No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.** The question is often raised, “can one live the rest of their life without sin?” But that is the wrong question. When you ask the wrong question you always get the wrong answer. The better question is this. “Can I, as a believer empowered by the Holy Spirit, be victorious over the next temptation that

comes my way?" The obvious answer is "yes." Having the mind of Christ in this matter is essential in overcoming sin in our lives. Rather than viewing sin as inevitable, believe that victory is yours through your faith in Christ. **1 John 5:4, For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.**

Thankfully, John does say in **1 John 2:1, ...But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.** If a believer sins, Christ is there to plead his case before the Father. John states in **1 John 1:7, But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.**

The reality is that believers will have to fight against sin as long as they are in this body. The Apostle Peter spoke of this fight against sin in **1 Peter 2:11, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.** This is an exhortation that every believer must fight against those inward temptations to sin that Christians will face as long as they are in this body. Paul gives us this clear instruction regarding the fight against sin in **Romans 8:13. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.** The power to put sin to death is in the Spirit of God, not us.

For too long, many believers have made excuses for sin without realizing it. The teaching that believers are sinners has only further excused sin. After all, teachers teach, swimmers swim, and sinners sin. May we return to the Biblical truth of who we are in Christ as saints and walk as holy ones. May we, by God's grace, have the same attitude toward sin that Jesus did, a zero-tolerance policy. Jesus made no provision for the flesh to fulfill its desires. That should be our mindset as well. May God help us to strive for holiness in our daily lives. The Apostle Peter wrote in **1 Peter 1:14-16, As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."**

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- 1) Have you ever considered Jesus' attitude toward sin? How did he approach temptations to sin? Do you approach them the same way?
- 2) Jesus told the man that he healed in John 5:14, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." Why would Jesus give this command if he believed it impossible?

## A NEED FOR PERSONAL STUDY

Whenever we are presented with a teaching from the Word of God, our practice should always be to search the Scriptures for ourselves and not take someone else's word on it. That is why every reader is encouraged to make this study their own. Before you come to a conclusion regarding your view, take the time to read every verse in the Bible that mentions "sinner," "sinners," "saint," and "saints." Meditate on those verses and seek to see the contrast between saints and sinners. Search the meaning of the words and look at their context. Consider the whole of Scripture to see if this teaching is in accordance with the Word of God.

Sadly, many who call themselves Christians today rarely study the Word of God. Instead, they have grown accustomed to believing what they have been told about the Bible. Most churches have a doctrinal statement or statement of beliefs that they endorse. Often, the members of these churches state they agree with such statements without ever having studied for themselves the very teachings they claim to believe. Ask yourself, "Have I ever really studied the Bible on this subject, and could I give solid biblical proof to show that every Christian is still a sinner?" If not, you most likely have believed what you were taught rather than basing your belief on the Word of God.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Living out our true identity in Christ is the exciting part of this study. When we actually put into practice the things we learn from God's Word, we become more like Jesus Christ. This is not about proving a point or winning an argument. Nor is this simply semantics. Knowing our true identity is about seeing God transform our lives into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ, as we grow in the knowledge of the truth. Here are some practical ways to live out this truth of our identity in Christ.

**1) Begin speaking about believers as God speaks of them.** God's Word consistently calls believers saints. It is important that all of our terminology and our theology agree with God and His Word. Regardless of our traditions or catchy phrases, we must speak about things as God speaks about them. Calling a Christian a "sinner" is never what God calls a Christian. For believers to refer to Christians as "saints" is not a proud statement. Rather, it magnifies the grace of God and the power of Jesus Christ to transform sinners into saints. It gives glory to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who saves his people from their sin (**Matthew 1:21**). It is also consistent with what Paul wrote in **Romans 12:3**:

For by the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Many unbelievers will readily admit they are sinners but then often follow up with the phrase, “but everyone is a sinner.” This is often done to justify their sin and to show that they are no worse than anyone else. By explaining that all people are born sinners, (enslaved to sin), it can then be shown that through faith in Christ, a person can be set free from sin’s bondage. Christians are now holy, set apart to God (saints) for His service. This also gives an opportunity to explain the new birth and how Christians are a “new creation” in Christ, set free from sin’s power and dominion. This truly is the “good news” of Jesus Christ and the hope that is available to all who believe.

**2) Seek to understand the connection between beliefs and actions.** What we believe truly does affect how we live our lives. By learning Biblical truth, we experience more freedom. Jesus said in **John 8:32**, “**and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**”

Why is it that you won’t find atheists worshiping God? Because they don’t believe in God. Their beliefs affect their actions. Why is it that those who call themselves Christians are often defeated by sin? Because they don’t understand and believe their true identity in Christ as saints. They don’t consider themselves to be what God considers them to be, “**dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11)**.” Oh, that every Christian would believe what God says about their true identity in Christ as saints.

If a child grows up continually hearing from his parents that he cannot accomplish anything, he will inevitably act in line with that way of thinking. An employee who continually hears from his boss that he is useless and cannot get anything right will most likely *not* become a top producer.

Likewise, when Christians are led to believe that they are just “sinners,” they often begin to excuse their sins and justify their sinful behavior. After all, they reason, “we are all sinners.” Just as we expect teachers to teach and singers to sing, we expect sinners to sin. And yet the Bible teaches us that we are saints or holy ones. How would you expect a holy person to live their life? By being holy!

**3) Examine your own life to make sure that your faith is real.** Paul challenged the Corinthian church to “**Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith**” (**2 Corinthians 13:5**). As followers of Christ, we should

be striving for holiness, **“without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14)**. When we see what God has done for us, it will be a motivator to want to live for Him. Christ is our example, and his attitude toward sin should be our attitude toward sin. We should have a “zero-tolerance” policy toward sin as Jesus did. There should never be an excuse for our sin since the Bible teaches us that we have been given everything necessary for “life and godliness.” God’s Word promises us that in **2 Peter 1:3, His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence...**. When we see our true identity in Christ as saints, we are motivated to become what God called us to be.

**4) Study the Scripture to make sure that your beliefs are founded on God’s Word and not man’s teaching.** There is a deficiency of Biblical understanding in the churches today due to a lack of diligent study of God’s Word. As Christians, it is crucial that we carefully examine God’s Word to make sure what we believe is consistent with the Word of God. By so doing, we are demonstrating true humility. Will you be like the Bereans who examined the Scriptures “daily” (**Acts 17:11**) to see if what they were being taught was true? Don’t believe what you hear unless you have examined it from the Word of God. Search the Scriptures and see if this booklet and everything else you hear and believe aligns with the Word of God. **Romans 10:17, So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**

**5) Share the truths of Scripture with others.** Have you been challenged and encouraged by this truth of a believer’s identity in Christ? If so, than speak with others to encourage them as well. Has God been teaching you other things from his Word? Share what God is doing in your life with others. Oftentimes Christians are reluctant to discuss spiritual topics with other Christians for various reasons. This may be out of a sense of a lack of knowledge, or simply a personality that is more reserved. In either case, how will the message of Christ spread to unbelievers if believers are hesitant to even discuss the Scriptures with their own brothers and sisters in Christ?

Christians have not only the living, powerful Word of God in their possession, they also have the Holy Spirit of God dwelling in their hearts. With Christ as their Savior and God as their Father, Christians should be the most passionate people in the world. May God make us passionate for truth, for the souls of men, and for the glory of God through Jesus Christ.

**Romans 11:36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.**

## A CALL TO BELIEVE IN CHRIST

Some who read this booklet may never have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Others may have professed to believe in Christ but realize that they have never been set free from their slavery to sin. The Apostle Paul encourages the church in Corinth with the following words. **2 Corinthians 13:5** - **"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!"**

Jesus warned that many who consider themselves Christians would not enter the kingdom. He said in **Matthew 7:21**, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."**

Jesus said to Nicodemus, one of the religious leaders of his day, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3)**. Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant. Sadly, many today do not understand Jesus' words either. Let me ask you plainly, have you ever been born again? Have you ever been made a new person in Christ and been set free from the power of sin in your life by believing in Jesus Christ? According to Jesus, if you haven't been born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God. It is not enough to say that you have "accepted Jesus in your heart" or "asked for forgiveness." Jesus said you must be born again!

But how is one "born again"? Being "born again" is a work accomplished by the Spirit of God. For a person to believe in Jesus Christ and turn away from their sin, God must give them the power to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Do you desire to leave your sin and follow Jesus Christ? The gospel is the good news about what God has done in and through Jesus Christ to reconcile sinners to Himself. To reconcile means to bring two parties who are at odds with one another into a right relationship. According to the Bible, every person born into the world starts out as an enemy of God by birth. According to the Bible (**Romans 5:12**), we are sinners who are under God's judgment. Those who find themselves still enslaved to sin are lovingly urged to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ is the only way to be set free from sin's dominion. This is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ alone can change a sinner into a saint.

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (**Ephesians 3:20-21**)

To learn more about the Gospel, visit our website at:  
[www.LighthouseChristianMinistries.org/gospel](http://www.LighthouseChristianMinistries.org/gospel)

### Select Scriptures about “Sinners” and “Saints”

Psalm 1:1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of **sinners**, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

Psalm 104:35 Let **sinners** be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more! Bless the LORD, O my soul! Praise the LORD!

Proverbs 13:21 Disaster pursues **sinners**, but the righteous are rewarded with good.

Isaiah 1:28 But rebels and **sinners** shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.

Luke 5:32 I have not come to call the righteous but **sinners** to repentance.”

John 9:31 We know that God does not listen to **sinners**, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.

Romans 5:19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made **sinners**, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Hebrews 7:26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from **sinners**, and exalted above the heavens.

Psalm 31:23 Love the LORD, all you his **saints**! The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.

Psalm 37:28 For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his **saints**. They are preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

Acts 9:13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your **saints** at Jerusalem.

Romans 1:7 To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be **saints**: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:15 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the **saints**,

Revelation 14:12 Here is a call for the endurance of the **saints**, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.