

Saints or Sinners?

1) I often hear Christians say, “We’re all sinners,” or “I’m just a sinner saved by grace.” Is it appropriate for believers to refer to themselves as “sinners”?

A) The problem of sin.

- (1) Every human being is born spiritually dead. This means they are separated from God and cut off from the source of spiritual life, Jesus Christ (cf. John 17:3; Eph 2:1–2; Ps 51:5).
- (2) Every human being is born a sinner by nature. This means that although they are not yet personally guilty¹ of any sin, as soon as they are able, they will seek their own way and violate God’s law (Eph 2:3; Ps 58:3; Prov 22:15; Gen 8:21).
- (3) Every human being commits sin. This means that everyone (with the sole exception of Jesus; Heb 4:15) acts on their sinful nature and breaks God’s law (Rom 3:10–12, 23).
- (4) The NT consistently refers to the unsaved as “sinners” (cf. Luke 5:32; 1 Pet 4:18; 1 Tim 1:9; Rom 5:8). This terminology communicates the fact that unbelievers not only commit acts of sin, but are sinners by nature. They are enslaved to sin, and sin dominates their thoughts, their attitudes and their behavior (John 8:34; Rom 8:7–8).

B) Salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

- (1) When we are saved, we become spiritually alive in Christ. This means that we are united with Him spiritually—we are connected to the source of spiritual life (Eph 2:4–5; Col 2:13; 1 Cor 15:22).
- (2) When we are saved, we receive a new spiritual nature through the new birth (1 Pet 1:3; 2 Cor 5:17; 2 Pet 1:3–4). This means that we are changed, spiritually speaking, into a completely different person.
- (3) When we are saved, God forgives us and cleanses us from all sin. This means that we are no longer guilty of breaking His law (Col 1:13–14; Eph 1:7; Rom 4:7–8).
- (4) The NT consistently refers to the saved as “saints” (cf. Rom 1:7; 16:15; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2; Eph 2:19). The word “saint” (*hagios*) literally means “holy one.” As Christians, we have been washed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ and are holy before God (Col 1:21–22; Col 3:12; Eph 1:3–4; Eph 5:25–27).

C) A contrast of characteristics.

- (1) The letter of 1 John contains a thorough explanation of what it means to be a child of God. In the letter, John contrasts the children of God with the children

¹ We are born spiritually dead because of Adam’s sin (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22), but we are not personally guilty of Adam’s sin (cf. Ezek 18:4, 20; Jer 31:29–30).

of the devil. These two *distinct* groups are characterized by definite patterns of behavior:

(a) A child of God:

- (i) Positively: has fellowship with the Father and His Son (1:3), walks/abides in the light (1:7; 2:10), confesses his sins (1:9), keeps His commandments (2:5; 3:22, 24), loves his brother (2:10; 3:14), knows God, the Father—the One from the beginning (2:13, 14; 4:6, 7), has overcome the evil one (2:13, 14), is strong (2:14), does the will of God (2:17), confesses Jesus as the Son of God, and believes him to be the Christ (2:23; 4:15; 5:1), does righteousness (3:7), purifies himself just as Christ is pure (3:3), is receiving what he asks for from the Father (3:22), does what is pleasing to Him (3:22), abides in Him (3:24), loves [others] (4:7), overcomes the world (5:4), and has the Son and life (5:12).
- (ii) Negatively: he has no cause of stumbling in himself (2:10), and does not make a practice of sinning (3:6, 9; 5:18).

(b) A child of the devil:

- (i) Positively: walks in darkness (1:5; 2:11), may claim to be sinless (1:8), may claim to have never sinned (1:10), hates his brother (2:9, 11; 3:15), loves the world (2:15), may deny that Jesus is the Christ thereby denying the Father and the Son (2:22), and commits sin and acts of lawlessness (3:4, 6, 8).
- (ii) Negatively: does not keep his commandments (2:4), does not know where he is going because the darkness he walks in has blinded him (2:11), has not seen God (3:6), does not do righteousness (3:10), does not love his brother (3:10; 4:21), does not love (3:14), does not listen to the inspired author (4:6), does not know God (4:8), and does not have the Son of God or eternal life (5:12).

(2) The contrast is stunning. A child of God walks in the light and does not sin. A child of the devil walks in darkness and commits sin.

D) Theological and practical implications.

- (1) Scripture separates people into two groups: those who are saved and those who are lost. There is no hierarchy of spiritual states with saints at the top, the very wicked at the bottom, and everyone else in between. Rather, there are only two kinds of people—either you are child of God or you are a child of the devil.
- (2) When a sinner commits an act of sin, they are behaving in accord with their nature and in harmony with the will of their father the devil (John 8:44). A sinner sins because that is who they are—everything they do is tainted by self and sin (Isa 64:6). When a saint commits an act of sin, they are behaving in opposition to their nature and out of harmony with the will of God their Father (John 8:47). A Christian sins because they have given into temptation, and the Holy Spirit immediately convicts them and prompts them to repent. They then respond in obedience and return to a life of walking in the Spirit (Gal 5:25). Genuine Christians do not practice willful sin—unrepentant persistence in sin is evidence

of either a false profession (1 John 2:4, 19) or a re-entanglement and defeat by the “defilements of the world” (2 Pet 2:20–22).

(3) How we view ourselves spiritually has a huge impact on how we live our lives. Paul deals with this issue in Romans 6:1–10. A saint is dead to sin—therefore do not let “sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires” (Rom 6:12). We are to think of ourselves, and talk to ourselves, in terms of our new nature! You have been freed from sin to God and are a saint—now act like it!

(a) Michael Kruger comments: “If we think of ourselves as ‘sinners’ and call ourselves ‘sinners,’ then our sins become something rather ordinary and inevitable. They are just the result of who we are. Sure, we wish we didn’t sin, but that’s what ‘sinners’ do. If instead we view ourselves as who we really are—‘saints’—then we will see our sin in a whole new light. We are ‘holy ones,’ and the sins we commit are a deep, profound, and serious departure from God’s calling. Our sin, in a sense, is even more heinous because it is now being done by someone who has a new nature and a new identity.”²

E) Conclusion—in the light of Scripture, the appropriate word for those who have been saved by grace is “saint.” The word “sinner” should be used to speak of those who are lost in sin and separated from God.³ We, as Christians, are “holy ones,” and we are called to hate sin and walk in holiness. If we do sin—and it should never be the practice of our lives—we should repent and ask God’s forgiveness. We should then recommit ourselves to Him and keep walking in the light.

(1) We must be careful how we describe the spiritual state of a true believer; otherwise, we run the risk of speaking heresy. Paul said that if the ministry of Christ leaves us in the state of still being sinners, then Christ is the minister of sin. I say with Paul—“May it never be!” (Gal 2:17 NASB).

2) **When I tell other Christians that I’m not a sinner, they accuse me of advocating “sinless perfection.” How should I respond?**

A) The Bible emphasizes that Christians have been born again. They have a new nature and are no longer slaves to sin. But Scripture is not naïve about the fact that believers can and sometimes do commit sin (1 Cor 3:1–3; 1 John 2:1–2; Ecc 7:20). In fact, it is possible for genuine Christians, through ignorance or the deception of the enemy, to behave in ways that are very fleshly and sinful (1 Cor 5:1–2; Jam 4:1–12).

(1) Sin in the church is a serious issue. Many of Paul’s letters contain direct rebukes of the kinds of sins mentioned above. When individuals persisted in wrongdoing, Paul called for church discipline (1 Cor 5:11–13; 2 Thess 3:6; cf. also 2 John 1:10–11). That discipline was designed to bring them to repentance and restore them to fellowship.

² Michael J. Kruger, “Saint or Sinner? Rethinking the Language of Our Christian Identity,” Blog Post, Cited 3/5/2014. Note that I disagree completely with his understanding of Romans 7.

³ Paul referred to himself as the “foremost” (or “chief”) of sinners (1 Tim 1:15), but Paul used this terminology to refer to his old life as a persecutor of the church. He says, “formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13).

- B) However, the fact that a saint can sin does not mean that we should refer to ourselves as sinners. We are saints who sometimes sin, not sinners who sometimes obey. If someone reacts to your claim of not being a sinner, I recommend the following response: "I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ and He has called me to live a holy life. I'm doing my best, with the help of His grace, to resist the devil and to walk in the Spirit every day. If I do sin, I ask God to forgive me and I keep pressing forward. I do not and I will not allow my life to be characterized by willful sin."