

Introduction SINNER OR SAINT?

Many years ago I was president of a stock brokerage firm. Before getting ready for work I often lounged around the house in cut-off jeans and a t-shirt. I lived in Southern California where the weather was almost always ideal so that was a frequent mode of dress.

I remember seeing a transformation take place in me as I got ready for work. As I stood in front of the mirror buttoning my shirt, then tying my tie, I saw my face almost physically change. From the carefree, relaxed look before, my face became focused and intent. I was becoming the president of the company.

I remember so well that difference, even to how I felt, how the priorities changed as I dressed for work, and how my thoughts focused on the work and challenges ahead. I came to realize that what we understand ourselves to be may strongly influence how we look and behave.

Sinner or Saint? Perhaps you see the immediate application to the question: Are Christians sinners or saints? If we think of ourselves as sinners won't we act like sinners and have the demeanor of sinners? If we realize we are saints, won't we be more inclined to act like saints?

Perhaps you've heard, as I have, the saying, "I'm just a sinner saved by grace." While that sounds both good and humble, is it true? The saying is in the present tense, i.e., it is saying that the person is presently a sinner. Are Christians sinners? Are sinners Christians? Let's see what Scripture says.

Paul's Hebrew Style of Writing A scripture that would appear to be directly on point is from the Apostle Paul:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Paul used the present tense when calling himself a sinner. Surely that means that all the rest of us are sinners as well. Unfortunately, it isn't that easy and such reasoning leads to a faulty conclusion.

In an earlier article, "Romans 7 Revisited,"^[1] I discussed the present tense issue as Paul created the same difficulty by using the present tense in Romans 7:14-24. Both passages appear inconsistent with the rest of Scripture because of Paul's present tense use of the verbs. He makes it sound as if it were applicable to him at the time he wrote it. After we look at this anomaly more closely, I'm sure you'll see that the

unusual use of verbs is Paul's writing style and is/was a common Hebrew way of writing.

In the Preface to *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, the translator tells us of two principles to understand about Hebrew writers (even though they may be writing in the Greek language):

I. That the Hebrews were in the habit of using the past tense to express the *certainty* of an action taking place, even though the action might not really be performed for some time.

II. That the Hebrews, in referring to events which might be either past or future were accustomed to act on the principle of transferring themselves mentally to the period and place of the events themselves, and were not content with coldly viewing them as those of a bygone or still coming time; hence the very frequent use of the present tense (emphasis added).

Apparently, that is what Paul did. He placed himself in the past as though it were the present. Since that is not the western way of speaking and writing, it has caused much confusion in understanding these passages. Based on what the other scriptures say about "sinners," you can make your own judgment on whether Paul is the worst of sinners or whether using present tense when speaking of a past situation is true of Paul's writing in this instance.

Are Christians Called Sinners In Scripture? Only the New Testament refers to Christians so we'll confine our inquiry to the text of the New Testament. The first scripture that comes to mind is Romans 5:6, 8: You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us [Note: All emphasis added is by the author and is not in Scripture].

First please note that Christ died for the ungodly (vs. 6) and then Christ died for sinners (vs. 8). Paul equates the ungodly with sinners. Christians are never characterized as ungodly. Next note that the past tense is used – while we were still sinners. That clearly implies a change of status. While we "were" still sinners is a prior status of being sinners, different from what the recipients of the letter were as Paul wrote them. Who were the recipients of the letter? Paul described them: "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (Romans 1:7). Paul did not address his letter to sinners but to those called to be saints!

There are 28 uses of the word "sinners" and 13 of the word "sinner" in the New Testament Scripture. **None refer to people who have come to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus.** Let's look at some examples.

Jesus revealed that a purpose of his coming was to save sinners: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17. See also Luke 15:7,10 and Matthew 9:12-13).

The term "sinners" is used twelve times in passages relating to Jesus having dinner with Matthew and Levi:

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:10-13).

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:15-17. See also Luke 7:34, 19:7).

Jesus was criticized for associating with Matthew, Levi, and other sinners:

"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners'" (Matthew 11:19. See Luke 5:30-32; 7:39; and 15:1-2).

Matthew and Mark describe the betrayal of Jesus into the hands of the unbelieving Jews, whom he called "sinners":

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners (Matthew 26:45. See also Mark 14:41).

Jesus reviewed the actions of "sinners." "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full" (Luke 6:32-34).

Jesus taught about cause and effect using the word "sinners:"

Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? (Luke 13:2).

The story of the man born blind used the word "sinners" once and "sinner" twice. A second time they [the Pharisees] summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man [Jesus] is a sinner." (See also John 9:16). He [the formerly blind man] replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:24-25) "We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will" (John 9:31).

Paul taught the contrast between sinners and those who are righteous: For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:19. See also Galatians 2:15-17, Romans 3:7, Hebrews 7:26 (about Jesus), and 1 Timothy 2:14).

James warned sinners (James 4:8-10), Jude quoted Enoch who called sinners ungodly (Jude 14-15), the tax collector begged for mercy, acknowledging himself to be a sinner (Luke 18:13), and Peter asked, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" (1 Peter 4:18).

Finally, James said that if a believer wandered from the truth he was called a "sinner", which would indicate he was no longer a believer but one who had to be brought back through repentance to a saving faith: My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20).

NONE of those scriptures shows the "sinner" as anything but an unredeemed person, an unbeliever, or even someone who has wandered from the truth. **NEVER is a person with a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ called a sinner.**

None of us who claim to be Christians with a saving faith should ever call ourselves a sinner. It is not appropriate to try to claim common ground with unbelievers or immature Christians by saying that you also are a sinner. Scripture says otherwise. Christians are not "sinners." If you are a sinner – **one who habitually sins**, you are not a true believer. In that case you can properly call yourself a sinner. Please note the distinction: Christians do occasionally sin. A sinner habitually sins. The Christian (should) immediately repent and seek God's forgiveness. The sinner does not.

A Christian can properly say, "I was a sinner, but have been saved by grace."