

SINNERS OR SAINTS?  
[written in oral form]

Luke 18:9-14  
Proper 24, year C

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Saints and Sinners.

As most of you know, I was raised in a Baptist church, and back then, most Baptist churches were greatly influenced by revivalism.

Saints and Sinners were hot topics, except they usually used the language of Saved and Sinners or the lost.

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Periodically, a specimen of radical conversion would speak to my youth group. He was suppose to be an inspiration and example of why we needed to be saved.

Typically, the transformed young man, *always a man*, he would tell us about all the terrible things he had done, such as drinking, drugs, womanizing and running from the law. He would then triumphantly declare, "But all that ended, once I was saved."

Yet being naive church kids, we were more fascinated with his "sinful" exploits. We would press him to tell us more about his "terrible" past.

I think those *Inspirational talks* had the opposite effect.

The church had emphasized conformity and obedience to the church's moral code, and they did that by putting the fear of God in us.

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There is a line from Joni Mitchell's song, "A case of you", that speaks to this. The line is: "I'm frightened by the devil, but I'm drawn to those ones that ain't."

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I think the church is missing the point and is counterproductive when it seeks to eradicate sinners.

That sort of crusade tends to play out by worshipping a designated "righteous standard" for living.

The saved / the saints find assurance in their faithful obedience to behaving a certain "pure" way. The outside world could see the charade more clearly, and would label such Christians has hypocrites. Interesting.

Even so, the self proclaimed saints would march on in their pursuit to purge the world of sin and sinners.

This gets ugly when morality is legislated, such as with abortion. Those laws don't change a thing, except with **increasing** the level of pride and arrogance in the crusaders,..... and **increasing** the consequential scale of injustice.

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Nevertheless, the fight against sinners continued.

I think believing that oneself was on the good side, gave a degree of assurance. I suppose that is the case. It makes life simpler.

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I recall, when I was around 19 years old, my mother ranting about the evil things that sinners do. She said, "They drink, they smoke, they cuss and stay out late at night..." I interrupted her, and said, "Mom, do you realize that you are describing your son?"

I think my comment greatly troubled my mother, in more ways than one.

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It truly is noble to try to do the right thing and to have high moral standards. It truly is noble, yet such pursuit must be honest.

Anything less than full honesty is delusional, corrupt and even destructive.

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Before I continue, we need to understand what it means to be a saint or a sinner. They need to be clarified because there are all of kinds of definitions and assumptions.

I will avoid the language of "lost" and "saved" because it is bigger than that.

I confess, I had fun researching over the past couple of weeks. I enjoyed refreshing my memory on the types of morality, from the normative sense to Immanuel Kant on systems action.

Nevertheless, I decided to go with the Biblical understanding, with a bias to the New Testament.

Saint does not designate a superior status. It was Not a singling out.

There are 65 citations of saints in the Bible.

Not surprisingly, there are 83 references to sinners.

Basically, saints are the righteous; those that are in a good relationship with God. There is very little connection to behaviour, and much more about relationship / connection with God.

There are numerous references in the NT that labels all those who choose to follow Christ -- as Saints! The believers / those who sought to do God's will / those who were trying to be in a right relationship with God were called saints.

Sinner, on the other hand, had various interpretations.

The religious elite, such as the Pharisees, labelled anyone who did not abide by the religious rules and customs--Sinners.

On a number occasions, the religious elite were arrogantly shocked that Jesus hung out and enjoyed the company of sinners and tax collectors.

Sinners and tax collectors seem to be in the same category. Maybe that is true today,.. for some.

When the voice speaking is Jesus or God, then behaviour was a factor in determining who was a sinner. Sinners were those who were choosing to go against God's will / those who were consumed with themselves / those who were selfish and greedy.

Sin is whatever hurts our relationship with God and all of creation.  
To be very sinful was to openly reject God.

Noteworthy, is that Jesus frequently reached out to sinners. Jesus sought relationships with them. Jesus tried to get the sinner to shift to be in a better relationship with God. That is the way of Christ.

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Today's passage is a compare and contrast parable.

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Jesus is addressing those who trust in themselves / those who are proud of following the rules, and despise those who do not.

The Pharisee personifies self righteousness.

He was in the temple to pray, yet he was not really talking with God.  
He was not humble in his presence before God.

Instead, he boasted that he was not like other *lesser* people. He listed some of those he despised and devalued, including tax collectors.  
He was referring to one who he could see not too far away.

Then the pompous religious man, bragged about how he did above and beyond what was required to be considered pious and outstanding.  
He appeared to be a model and devoted religious person.

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In contrast, the tax collector, .....and no doubt he collected the carbon tax,.... the tax collector stood alone and never looked up.

He berated himself and cried out, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

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Jesus said it was the tax collector who was forgiven. God responded to his prayer.

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Who was the sinner? Who was the saint?

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My first Mennonite church was a store front church. We were partly a few life long Mennonites who had come to help plant the church. We were mostly the marginalized, including many homeless people.

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The nascent congregation depended on the generous donations from three big Mennonite churches in Holmes Cty. They were traditional churches, and not that far removed from the Amish community.

After the first year, those three churches wanted some measurable production for their investment. They asked me to bring some success specimens to their churches.

To be sure, their definition of success was a radical transformation to the middle class / to be someone who looked and acted as they did.

I assured them that wonderful things were happening. We were helping people get off the streets. We were helping people find a bed of their own instead of a friends couch or a man's bed. People were becoming hopeful, some were even looking for work.

Regardless, the churches wanted proof. Fair enough. I invited those from the big churches to attend our worship service some Sunday to see for themselves. A couple of auditors, I mean "men" did come.

They saw an ash tray outside by our front door, that was even used during the service. They could smell stale alcohol on a couple of individuals breath.. who stayed up all night so they would not miss church. No doubt, some of our members asked the guests for a "temporary" loan. I am sure the singing was not up to standard either.

Moreover, they were disappointed that our members, some recently baptised, were not "Mennonite." One visitor even said that.

By standard church expectations, we were a sorry looking group. The three churches began reducing their financial support.

Who were the sinners? Who were the saints?  
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Brent was a seminar student. He started the same year as I did. I got to know him pretty well because I worked with him on the seminary's landscape crew. He was a character.

He made it clear he had no intentions to be a church minister. He just wanted to study theology. He was intelligent, and very well read.

He was also a jokester and an appalling lecher.  
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A couple months into the seminary, I received a letter on seminary stationary from the Dean of Student Affairs. I was to report to her, at a particular time, about information they had on me that would lead to me being put on probation. Puzzled, I sheepishly showed up at the designated time,... only to be embarrassed. She had not sent the letter. It was not her signature, and she was not amused in the least, either.

An hour or two later, while at work, Brent asked with a big smile, "How was your visit with the Dean?"  
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As I got to know Brent better, he confessed that he had a terrible problem. He was consumed with a lust for women, and not in a healthy, respectful way. He shared that he would regularly use prostitutes. I tried to help him with his warped and twisted regard for women, but I think he needed serious professional help.  
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Brent was a lousy and lazy worker, a lecher and a jokester, but he also had a caring side. When he could, he would volunteer at the downtown homeless shelter.

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A couple years later, he was cruising the high risk part of town.

No doubt he was looking for a prostitute.

As he slowly drove down a street, he noticed a man pushing, shoving and hitting a women. He stopped on the opposite side of the street, and blew his car horn a number of times. The man took off running. There was no one else around.

The woman was sitting on the curb sobbing. Brent went to her.

He asked her if she needed a ride somewhere.

I do not think his intentions were pure, yet he was a trustworthy person. He would not act against her will.

She declined, but asked if he would stay with her for a bit until she could calm down.

So, Brent sat on the curb next to her and said nothing for nearly 10 minutes.

Suddenly, her violent male friend reappeared. He quickly ran up and stood over Brent. He demanded Brent's car keys.

Brent reached in his pocket and pulled them out.

He looked up at the man as he gave him the keys, and the man shot him in the face. He then fled in Brent's car, leaving Brent and the young lady behind.

The bullet went through the front of his skull, went through his left eye and out his cheek. Aside from blindness in one eye, he is fine.

Is Brent a sinner or a saint?

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I will add, Brent is now the administer of that homeless shelter.

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Sinner or saint? ???????

At best, we are both sinner and saint.

We are both sinner and saint.

Carl Jung said that the first step to enlightenment is to encounter and acknowledge our shadow side.

Jordan Peterson, professor of psychology at University of Toronto, noted that everything horrible done by human beings was done by human beings,... and we are one of them.

We all have that potential within us. That is part of who we are.

The tax collector was aware of the sin with in him, and it scared him to death.

Knowing and accepting that we are sinners ... will cause us to reach out to God / to cling to God to discover a right relationship. We will do so because we are aware of the consequences and the risks to ourselves and others, if we do NOT have a good relationship with God.

Seeking God, confessing our sins, believing in God's love and grace makes us saints.  
At best, we are both Saints and Sinners, and we grow in that wisdom.

Our theme requires that I answer the question:  
What's so good about the Good News?

Well, it is first Bad news until we see God's mercy and grace for everyone.