

Saint vs. Sinner: Identity in the New Testament

One of the most significant—and frequently misunderstood—truths in the New Testament concerns the identity of the believer. Contrary to common language within Christian culture, the New Testament consistently refers to followers of Christ not as sinners, but as **saints (holy ones)**. This distinction is not merely semantic; it is theological and foundational to understanding salvation, transformation, and the Christian life.

The designation of “**saint (holy ones)**” is not based on a believer’s moral performance, spiritual maturity, or personal progress. Rather, it is grounded in one’s position in Christ. From the moment of conversion, the believer is brought into a new identity. The Greek term commonly translated as “saints (holy ones)” (*hagioi*) literally means “holy ones,” referring to those who have been set apart for God. This identity is not gradually attained but decisively granted through union with Christ.

To be “in Christ” is to be made holy—not gradually, but decisively.

A Transfer of Identity

The New Testament presents salvation not merely as forgiveness, but as a decisive transfer. Believers are described as having moved from death to life (John 5:24), from darkness to light (Colossians 1:13), and from alienation to reconciliation (Romans 5:10). This transition marks a fundamental change in identity.

While the term “sinner” is used throughout Scripture, it is most often employed to describe those who remain outside of Christ. In contrast, believers are consistently addressed as **saints (holy ones)**. This shift in language reflects a deeper ontological transformation. The Christian is not simply a forgiven sinner but a redeemed and redefined person.

The Tension of the Christian Life

Despite this new identity, believers continue to experience the reality of sin. This creates an apparent tension: how can one be both a **saint (holy ones)** and still struggle with sin?

A helpful framework is to distinguish between position and condition. In terms of position, the believer is fully righteous in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). In terms of condition, the believer is still undergoing sanctification (Philippians 1:6). This distinction preserves both the completeness of justification and the ongoing nature of spiritual growth.

The Reformers articulated this tension with clarity. Martin Luther described the believer as *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously righteous and sinner. Properly understood, this phrase does not suggest a divided identity, but rather acknowledges the coexistence of a settled status in Christ alongside an ongoing struggle against sin.

Identity and Transformation

Understanding one’s identity is essential for spiritual formation. Human behavior is deeply shaped by self-perception. Individuals tend to live in accordance with what they believe to be true about themselves. If a believer primarily identifies as a sinner, this may lead to an expectation of continual defeat and a diminished vision for transformation.

Conversely, recognizing oneself as a **saint (holy ones)**—set apart and belonging to God—reorients the Christian life. Growth is no longer driven by an attempt to achieve a new identity, but by learning to live consistently with an identity already given. Transformation, therefore, flows from identity rather than toward it.

This perspective aligns with the broader New Testament emphasis on union with Christ. Believers are described as children of God (Romans 8:16), new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17), and those who have been raised with Christ (Colossians 3:1). These descriptions reinforce the reality that identity precedes and empowers transformation.

Not Perfection, but Direction

Affirming that believers are **saints (holy ones)** does not imply moral perfection or the absence of struggle. The New Testament is clear that the Christian life involves ongoing conflict with sin (Galatians 5:17), as well as experiences of weakness and suffering (2 Corinthians 12:9).

However, these struggles no longer define the believer's identity. Instead, they serve as the context in which faith is refined and dependence on God is deepened. The Christian life is marked not by perfection, but by direction—a consistent movement toward Christlikeness.

Importantly, believers are called to engage in this struggle from a place of victory, not in pursuit of it. The work of Christ has already secured their standing before God, allowing them to pursue holiness with confidence rather than fear.

Conclusion

The distinction between “saint (holy ones)” and “sinner” is central to a proper understanding of Christian identity. The New Testament affirms that believers are not sinners striving to become **saints (holy ones)**, but **saints (holy ones)** who continue to contend with sin.

This identity is rooted in the finished work of Christ and is not subject to fluctuation based on personal performance. While the process of sanctification is ongoing, the believer's status as holy and set apart is already established.

Therefore, the Christian life is best understood not as a pursuit of a new identity, but as the faithful outworking of an identity already received. To live as a **saint (holy ones)** is to walk in the reality of what God has already declared to be true.