

Saints and Sinners

A “saint” is not a long-dead godly person who performed miracles while they were alive. The Bible nowhere defines or uses the term that way. Instead, a “saint” is a Christian, alive or dead, who is “*sanctified* (‘*set apart*’ from *profane things* and *dedicated to God*; *holy*) in Christ,” 1Cor.1:2. Contrastingly, everyone is a “sinner” in the sense of having violated the law of God; so says Rom.3:23. But the New Testament also uses the term “sinner” to describe those who are supposedly the antithesis of God’s people. I say “supposedly” because the line between “saint” and “sinner” is not always as distinct to us as it ought to be. 1Jn.3:10 says it is “*obvious*.” However, this blurring of the distinctive line (to us rather than God) is not due to the “sinners” becoming more “saintly” is it?

Jesus made it very clear that He expects those who claim to be His people to *feel* and *live* differently from those of the world. Note two quick examples from Luke 6:

- “*And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them,*” v.32. Loving those who don’t love you is evidence of being a child of God, Matt.5:45. Of what is *loving only those who love you* then evidence? Don’t let the title you give yourself delude you. God isn’t deceived. If we refuse to love those who don’t love us, we’re more “sinner” than “saint”! If you want to be numbered among God’s people, love differently, more, and better than the sinners *by loving those who don’t love you*.
- “*And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even the sinners do the same thing,*” v.33. It’s not just important to *feel* the right way about those who don’t reciprocate those emotions, it’s also vital to *do* the right things to/for them, even if they do the wrong things to you. Jesus said so in the Sermon on the Mount, “*But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men,*” Luke 6:35. *Thinking* and *feeling* the right way about “sinners” is essential to being a “saint” primarily because without the right *mindset*, the right *activity* will never follow. Unless we *love* and *live* better than “the sinners,” we’re not really “saints” at all!

So, what should happen when a supposed “saint” *loves* and *lives* no better than “the sinners”? To be blunt, since he has decided to “play for the other team,” **his brethren should make it clear to him that he’s switched sides by withdrawing their fellowship from him**. That is what both the Thessalonian and the Corinthian churches were told to do with their unrepentant *sinful saints*, cf. 2Thess.3:6-14 and 1Cor.5:1-13. Why this course? Hopefully, the disciplinary action will cause him to repent and return to living the way “saints” should so “*that his spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus,*” 1Cor.5:5b.

But there are additional reasons to withdraw fellowship from saints who live like sinners. **Such people have a very detrimental effect on other members of the church who are trying to do the right thing(s)**. Paul warned the Corinthians of this danger with the rhetorical question, “*Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?*” cf. 1Cor.5:6.

Also, saints who live like sinners **actually become a dangerous deterrent to the spread of the gospel**. In Rom.2:23-24, Paul is addressing the supposed “people of God” who were, in fact, “sinners,” with these stinging words, “*You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles (ie. sinners) because of you,’ just as it is written.*” Not only do saints who live like sinners miss heaven themselves, they cause others to miss it as well through their hypocritical example!

Please remember Jesus’ words from Matt.5:20, “*For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.*” The “*Scribes and Pharisees*” were supposed to be God’s people, but lived more like “sinners” than “saints,” cf. Matt.23. Please heed the Savior’s warning. (Philip C. Strong; Viking Drive Church of Christ; 3791 Viking Drive, Bossier City, LA; online at vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)