

SAINT & SINNER

"Both/And" Sermon Series, week 4
A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

1 Corinthians 1:1-9
1 Timothy 1:12-17

November 2, 2025

Throughout this sermon series we have been confronted by our human tendency to push aside "both/and" statements and to instead grab ahold of "either/or" distinctions. We categorize and separate things and people, and by doing so we make judgements. But faith in Jesus Christ directs us away from an "either/or" experience of this world and of one another and into the biblical and spiritual truth that is "both/and."

Three weeks ago, we reflected on how a life of faith requires the involvement of both our heart and our head. Whereas you and I may personally lean in one direction or the other, a transformational faith is a relationship with God that engages our heart-centered emotions and our head-centered knowledge. Two weeks ago, we focused on our tendency to separate what we consider to be sacred from what we consider to be secular. However, Scripture challenged us to remember that God not only created everyone and everything, but God can also be anywhere and everywhere which means we should be looking and listening to God no matter where we are or what we are doing. Last week, it was all about the simple and yet complicated pronouns of us and them. We acknowledged the reality of different qualities that make us each uniquely created reflections of God while also focusing on the fact that it is God's enduring, transforming, uniting, and saving power of love that is the basis of our true identity as children of God. Last week's "both/and" challenge invited each one of us to embrace the inherent value and blessing that is unity amid diversity.

Being that today is All Saints Sunday, our four week "Both/And" sermon series concludes with the thematically appropriate emphasis that is both "Saint & Sinner." Unfortunately, in this divided "either/or" world in which we live, we can easily fall into the trap of seeing ourselves as "holier-than-thou," the saints, and then pointing fingers and casting blame on those we think have it wrong, the sinners. In our "either/or" world there is a tendency to see ourselves as the good and holy ones on God's side which then means that those who are not standing with us are not standing with God and must be the bad and sinful ones.

Therefore, I begin today's "both/and" emphasis by reminding you of a very important point made by Paul in his letter to the church in Rome and repeated by him many additional times in his letters to other churches. His point is nothing less than a central tenet of our faith as Christians, *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). In other words, we are all sinners! But thankfully, there is good news for all of us sinners because we are *"justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 3:24). Because of the pervasive human state of sinfulness God sent Jesus into the world to save us from the power of sin by way of an even greater power, the

power of grace. This powerful grace of God not only saves us, but it also sets into motion within us a life-long transformation process.

Certainly, we all have our own personal life stories of God's saving and transforming grace, many of our stories may not necessarily be ones that have others "sitting on the edge of their seats." And yet the presence of God's grace in our lives is seen and experienced through our daily words and actions which then have a positive, life-supporting impact on others. Of course, some of you may have a more dramatic story about God's saving and transforming grace in your life. Your story may have unexpected twists and turns and reflect an extreme change; it's not necessarily a better story, but such a story does tend to grab the attention and stir the hearts of others.

The Apostle Paul had such a story, and so he told it and retold his story about Jesus confronting him and blinding him on the road to Damascus. The emphasizing of his sinfulness was always of central importance to his story. He wanted everyone to understand that he was at a very low point. In today's passage, Paul says, "*I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence...*" but "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost*" (1 Timothy 1:13-15). He used the extreme words of "blasphemer, persecutor, violence, foremost sinner" to make it clear how bad he had been and how far he had fallen. But then in contrast to his sinfulness he then describes the extreme nature of God's grace as an "*overflowing grace*" (1 Timothy 1:14). This overflowing grace is why God was willing to stoop so very low to pick him up. So, despite Paul's awful, sinful past, Jesus not only extended to him the forgiving and redeeming power of grace he also called and appointed Paul to take the message of God's love and salvation to the Gentiles, to people he had previously loathed. God's grace turned Paul's life upside down – it turned Paul the persecutor into Paul the Apostle. Paul's point was that even the worst of sinners, him being a prime example, can be redeemed and transformed by grace!

Paul's story is hardly the only biblical story about God calling and using sinful people to do great things. There was Moses who murdered an Egyptian man, fled to another country, and came up with every excuse he could think of why he shouldn't be a part of God's plan to free the Israelites. There was Jonah who fled in the opposite direction when God told him to go to the City of Nineva to preach repentance so that the lives of thousands upon thousands of people might be saved. Jonah had no desire to help people he despised and who he would rather see destroyed than saved. There was David, King David, "*a man after God's own heart*" (1 Samuel 13:14), a good and faithful man in many ways and yet, he had an affair with one of his soldier's wife, then he devised a deceptive plan to try and "cover his tracks," and when that didn't work he had that soldier killed. And then there was Peter, Jesus' impulsive disciple who often said the wrong thing, the disciple who Jesus declared to be "*the rock I will build my church*" (Matthew 16:18) only to identify him as "*Satan*" (Matthew 16:23) a few verses later. He, of course, was the disciple who denied he knew Jesus not once but three times.

Certainly, each one of these individuals could have forever been defined and limited by the sins of their past, but instead the God of second chances

created something new and blessed from the failure of their brokenness. Throughout the Bible, the failures and destructiveness of sin is on full display. But also on full display is God's love for sinners and the power of God's grace to create a stark contrast between what was and what can be. Today, Paul reminds us that we like him are all sinners in need of God's justifying, saving grace through Jesus Christ. But it also reminds us that once the saving power of God's grace is received, the impactful work of grace continues. God's grace is never a "one and done" experience. Instead, it is a life-long process of transformation whereby God's sanctifying grace chips away at sins grip on us so that what we think and feel, what we say and do have us looking more and more like Jesus as time goes by. In fact, in the New Testament, there is a particular word used to identify those who have a relationship with God and who are striving to be more like Jesus – that word is "saint."

In the New Testament, Paul the sinful persecutor of Christians turned Christian leader uses the word "saint" regularly. The word "saints" means "holy ones." To the church in Corinth, Paul addressed his letter, *"...to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..."* (1 Corinthians 1:2). But that's not the only letter addressed to the saints. Paul also wrote *"To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus"* (Eph. 1:1); he wrote *"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons"* (Phil. 1:1); and he wrote *"To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae"* (Col. 1:1).

Clearly, Paul considers all those churches to be made up of "saints." For Paul, "saints" was not only a designation for those who were called to be holy like Jesus, but it was also how he identified those *"called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord"* (1 Corinthians 1:9). Whatever holiness exists only exists because of a relationship with God through Christ that results in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in someone's life. When Paul addresses his letters to the saints, he is acknowledging all those who have been saved by grace and who are also continuing to grow in grace because they are a part of a community of Christ followers.

I can't help but think that Paul's addressing of those first century church members as "saints" lifted their spirits during a difficult time of persecution and for some, martyrdom. By calling them "saints" Paul was highlighting their faithfulness and emphasizing the presence and power of God's grace in their lives. And isn't it true that people can often sense how they are viewed by others and as they do they tend to respond accordingly. So, if we discern that someone has high regard for us, then we are more likely to live up to that expectation. And conversely, if we discern that someone has a low opinion of us, our attitude and behavior often reflect that assessment. Paul's using of the word "saint" to address members of the various churches was clearly positive and affirming. It was his way of stating that the members of those churches were set apart, sanctified in Christ, and bound for heaven.

But Paul's letters never stopped with his initial "saintly" affirmation, because in every letter, he then goes on to admonishes the members of each

church for their specific faults and failures. He makes it clear that certain behaviors of theirs were proof of sin's continued presence and influence in their lives. Coming full circle and pointing out sin's presence was Paul's way of challenging them to stop what they were doing so that they could be who God was calling them to be, saints saved by grace and empowered by grace to live lives characterized by grace.

Today's both/and challenge invites us to acknowledge that it's not about us being either a saint or a sinner. It's about admitting that we are both a saint and a sinner. On our good days, perhaps our witness leans in a saintlier direction because our relationship with Christ is strong that day so both our words and actions reveal that we are firmly standing on the foundation of God's grace. But there are those other days when our witness is noticeably different as our words and actions are clearly not reflective of God's grace in our lives. As saints-in-progress and those whose sights are set on heaven, may our days be more defined by God's grace than by our sin so that Christ may be seen in us to the glory of God. Amen.