

HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SINNER AND A SAINT (If we're saved, why do we still sin?)

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
—John 3:6

Overview

Lutherans love “two-handed” thinking. For example, on the one hand, you’ve got *theology of glory, free will, and justification by works*. On the other hand, you’ve got *theology of the cross, bound will, and justification by faith*. Luther and Lutherans didn’t make up this kind of thinking, of course. You’ll find such thinking in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters. Nowhere is two-handed thinking more pronounced than in the understanding of a Christian person. Put simply, a Christian is two persons rolled into one! On the one hand, a Christian, though saved, is still sinful by nature: disobeying God’s commands, disbelieving God’s Word, and, consequently, dying. On the other hand, joined to Christ’s body, the Christian shares Christ’s attributes: obedience, faithfulness, and everlasting life—to name but a few.

In the New Testament, there are a number of different ways that these two “personalities” are described: flesh and spirit, old nature and new nature, old self and new self. Whichever way you slice it, the New Testament portrays the believer as righteous and sinful all at once (or here comes the Latin again, *simul iustus et peccator*). And although we might wish the church was full of saints, or even expect it to be, we know that’s not the case. The church is made up of believers—believers who are saints and sinners at the same time!

The Lutheran Handbook II readings for this session:
pp. 151–52, 186–87, 268–69, 284
(The Third Article: On Being Made Holy)

1 Remember the old cartoon image of how temptation works? A little “angel-self” sits on your right shoulder, and a little “devil-self” sits on your left shoulder. The devil tries to lead you into temptation, while the angel tries to deliver you from it.

Saint or sinner? Let’s see which side wins out in these temptations:

The Temptation	Devil-Self	Angel-Self
a. There is a piece of chocolate in front of you; you feel like indulging.	Encourages you to indulge.	Encourages you to refrain from indulging.
b. You’re fretting about life’s temptations; you have the urge to bite your fingernails.	Encourages you to satisfy the urge.	Encourages you to overcome the urge.
c. This stuff about saint and sinner has you frustrated; you feel like taking the pencil you have in your hand and breaking it in half.	Encourages you to destroy the pencil!	Encourages you to spare the pencil!

2 Play the TV game show *Jeopardy!* Lutheran Course style. In this game you must phrase your response in the form of a question!

The category is “Saints and Sinners.” Provide the questions for the following answers:

- A preferred way of thinking among Lutherans.
- A prerequisite for being a saint.
- The apostle Paul referred to himself as this.
- The Latin phrase Lutherans like to use to describe how one believer can be two persons at the same time.
- A Latin word that means “justified one” or “saint.”
- The Lutheran answer to the question “Can the finite bear the infinite?”
- This is what you are if you think you are not a sinner because you sometimes keep the Commandments.



Martin Luther wrote, “A Christian is righteous and a sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God.”

—Luther’s Works 26:232

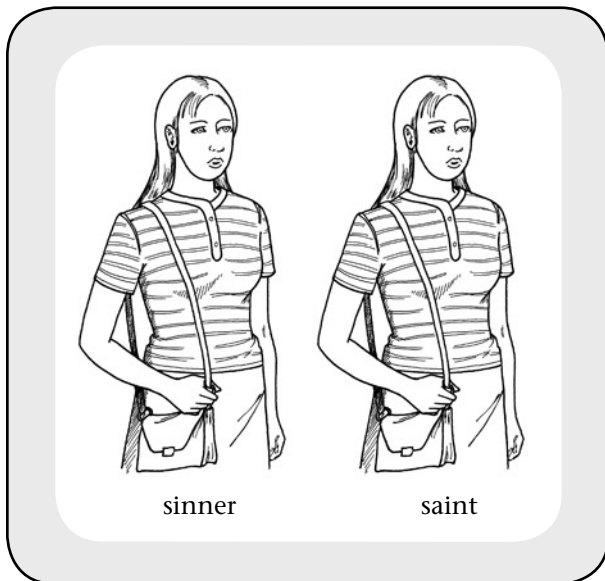
Use the following questions to get discussion going in your small group. When your discussion time is up, return to the large group.

- 1 Is something moral just because it is legal? Give examples.
- 2 Describe a time when you observed the behavior of someone else, and you thought to yourself, "Well, that's a side of that person I haven't seen before."
- 3 Is it bad for your self-esteem if you esteem yourself to be a sinner?
- 4 Think of the mistakes you made in your youth. If you could go back in time, what would you say to yourself? (No need to be too specific here—full disclosure is *not* necessary!)
- 5 If you are honest, it's probably not difficult to recognize your sinful self. But as a member of the body of Christ, can you recognize your saintly self? What are some of the attributes of the "Christlike" you?

Wrap-Up



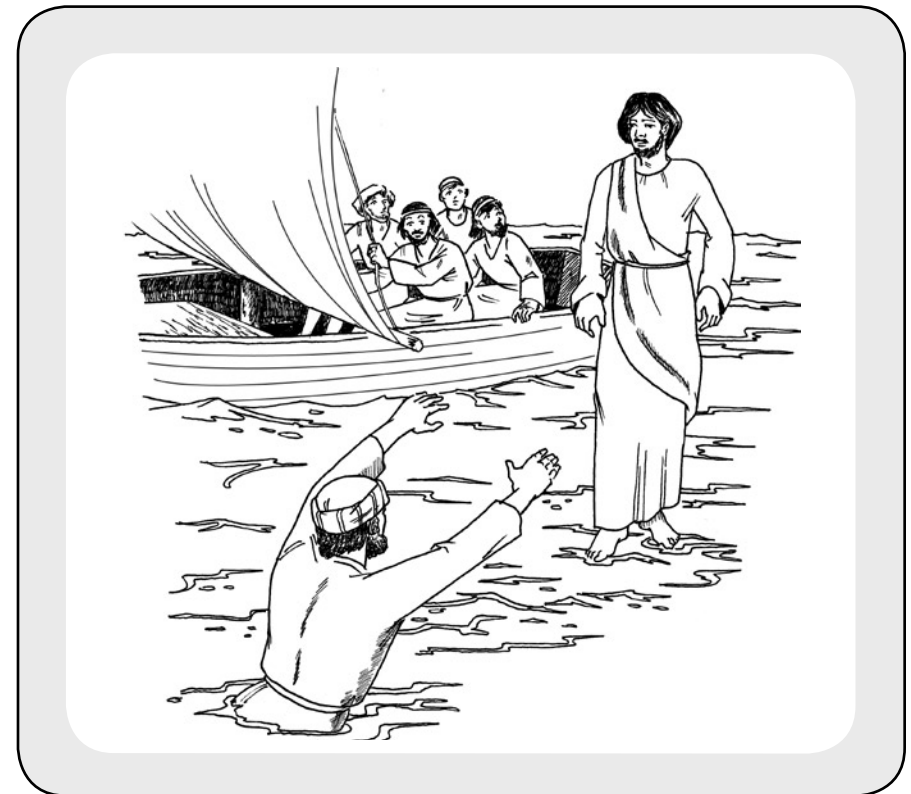
Group response for closing litany: This saying is true and worthy of acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.



It's impossible to tell a sinner from a saint, because all people are fully both. The church is filled with them.

Reflect: As you go about your daily life, what is your awareness of temptation? Do you find that you recognize when you are being tempted and that you struggle to take the high road? Or do you pretty much cave in to every desire and urge that happens to fall upon you? How does the prayer "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" inform the way you understand God's role in your temptations?

Read: For Session 5, read pages 72–74, 139–41, 153–54, 244–45, and 289–90 in *The Lutheran Handbook II*.



Many religious denominations consider Peter to be a saint, but he didn't walk on water.