

“In this Scripture-saturated book, Michael Emlet uses real-life counseling interactions and insights gained from years of counseling and training counselors to demonstrate how we can love, listen to, grieve with, challenge, and accept the people around us in ways that befit the gospel of the grace of Jesus.”

Nancy Guthrie, Author of *Saints & Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus*

“Michael Emlet has written a very compassionate, biblical, and helpful book, with practical guidelines for how to love others as God loves us. It emphasizes the need to hold all three truths in a balanced perspective for every person: as a saint in Christ, a sufferer, and a sinner. Highly recommended!”

Siang-Yang Tan, Professor of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary; author of *Shepherding God's People* and *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective*

“Dr. Michael Emlet has given us a treasure. He’s primarily focused on how we relate to others through the triple lens of saint, sufferer, and sinner. He’s particularly strong at blending those lenses together. The result? You can begin to look at and treat people as fully human. His experience as a counselor grounds his thoroughly biblical insights in real life. This immensely helpful book isn’t just for counselors—it’s for all of Jesus’s followers.”

Paul Miller, Author of *A Praying Life* and *J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life*

“As Christians, we know we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, but it can be hard to know what it means to offer love to our neighbors on the ground in concrete, daily ways. In this deep, rich, and practical book, Michael Emlet draws on Scripture and years of experience as a Christian husband, parent, church member, and counselor to help us more faithfully and fully love our neighbors, our spouses, our children, and all whom God brings into our lives. Through this exploration of what it means that we are all simultaneously saints, sufferers, and sinners, which is shaped by the wisdom of the Bible on every page, those who read this book will come away better equipped to fulfill the Great Commandment in the quotidian moments of everyday life and ministry.”

Kristen Deede Johnson, Dean and Professor of Theology and Christian Formation, Western Theological Seminary; award-winning author

“This book will give you a fuller view of yourself and those you love. It is clear, helpful, gentle, and wise, which just happens to be the way I would describe Mike.”

Edward T. Welch, Faculty and counselor, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF); author of *A Small Book for the Anxious Heart*

“Every person who seeks counseling brings a unique blend of history, beliefs, behaviors, circumstances, and relationships, but there are fundamental truths that apply broadly to every person we minister to. Our identity before God as saints, sufferers, and sinners is perhaps *the* foundational truth upon which our counseling stands. *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners* offers a deeply biblical and theological understanding of this reality and demonstrates how this broad principle fleshes out in the counseling experience with ground level practical application.”

Curtis Solomon, Executive Director, The Biblical Counseling Coalition

“Two things I appreciate about Michael Emler’s new book: 1) its clarity regarding the realities of believers being saints, sufferers, and sinners while we walk this earth, and 2) its realistic application of our identity in Christ affecting each of these dimensions of our lives in the way that we live, love, counsel, encourage, correct, and repent for the sake of others.”

Bryan Chapell, Pastor; author

“Too often we speak only to parts of people because we only see part of them: they just need to get over their sin, just need compassion because life has been hard, just need faith because it’s all that matters. Mike Emler’s *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners* refuses to over-simplify. Instead, Emler enables his readers in concrete, biblically rich ways to simultaneously take all three aspects of our Christian, human reality seriously. Full of winsome case studies, this book brims with wisdom in action about gently responding to sin, practical ways to encourage, and how to offer meaningful comfort to those who suffer. *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners* is the product of a lifetime of godliness from a man whose compassion and humble grace come through on every page. This must

become a foundational book for biblical counselors of every type for generations to come.”

J. Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF); coauthor of *Untangling Emotions*

“As a counselor, the value of seeing how the gospel speaks in unique ways to sin, suffering, and our identity as saints has been pivotal. As a pastor, these balanced truths are essential to being a good ambassador of the gospel. Michael Emlet’s work in *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners* is a must read for anyone wanting to accurately apply the gospel to the full breadth of human experience.”

Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling at The Summit Church; assistant professor of Biblical Counseling, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; general editor for *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*

“Many of us err in tending to see ‘the problem’ in ourselves or in others as only one of sin or idolatry, or entirely one of suffering, and in focusing on either we can forget that all God’s people are also saints in whom the Spirit is at work already. *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners* helps us see people as they really are. Where others stop, this accessible yet profound book also equips us for talking to those not yet safe in Christ’s kingdom. This book is everyday practical, richly biblical, and wonderfully re-balancing.”

Andrew Nicholls, Director of Pastoral Care, Oak Hill College, London

“With the precision of a physician and the compassion of a counselor, Michael Emlet offers readers a template for engagement and relationship that will help you reimagine gospel-centered counseling. Saturated in Scripture and brimming with real-life case studies, one can quickly recognize this is the fruit of many years of study in Scripture and walking with our Savior. Michael is the exact type of counselor I would want walking alongside me in my journey of faith.”

Jonathan D. Holmes, Pastor of Counseling, Parkside Church; executive director, Fieldstone Counseling

SAINTS,
SUFFERERS,
AND SINNERS

LOVING OTHERS AS GOD LOVES US

Michael R. Emlet



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To Lydia and Luke,

You have reminded me of the love of my heavenly Father.

You have walked with me in sorrow and grief.

*You have patiently borne my failures and sins, and freely offered me
forgiveness.*

I am incredibly privileged to be your father.

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Part 1: Understanding People



Chapter 1

OPERATING INSTRUCTIONS REQUIRED

Nearly everything we buy comes with instructions. Pieces of furniture come with assembly directions. Clothes come with laundering tips. Electronics come with operating instructions. And dozens of “how-to” books can help you learn any skill or trade. I tend to be rabid about seeking out instructions. I admit that sometimes I overdo it. My family still teases me mercilessly about the book I bought on how to raise a puppy, years before we actually had a dog. And then, once we got a dog, I never pulled it off the shelf. Sadly, our labradoodle Maddie is a poster dog for how *not* to raise a puppy! Operating instructions are clearly very important for navigating our world.

But don't you sometimes wish *people* came with operating instructions? Not that simple, right? Other people are complex. You and I are complex. How do we understand ourselves and each other? How do we move toward one another in

God-honoring ways? How do we love wisely in the context of everyday relationships and in more formal counseling settings?

LOVING WISELY IS NOT EASY

The practice of love takes many shapes in Scripture. We are commanded not to “wrong one another” (Leviticus 25:17). God calls us to sharpen one another as “iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17). We are to “show kindness and mercy to one another” (Zechariah 7:9) and “speak the truth to one another” (Zechariah 8:16). Jesus said, “Be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50). The apostle Paul calls us to “love one another with brotherly affection,” outdoing “one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). We are to “instruct one another” (Romans 15:14), “comfort one another” (2 Corinthians 13:11), and “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). Paul urges us to address “one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). He tells us that we should be “teaching” and “admonishing” one another (Colossians 3:16). We are to “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). James calls us to “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another” (James 5:16). That’s a dizzying array of ways God calls us to move toward each other in love! Loving others in these multifaceted ways means that we need to know and understand people well. Love doesn’t happen in abstraction but in concrete, person-specific ways.

But loving wisely and well is not easy, is it? Have you ever thought, “I don’t really understand what’s going on with this person; I don’t know where to begin to help”? Or, “What I said made perfect sense to me, but she walked away from me in anger”? Do other people ever frustrate or mystify you? Do you zig in a relationship and afterwards realize that you should have zagged? You admonished when you should have comforted?

You brought consolation when speaking a challenging word would have been the better path of love? It's likely that you yourself have been the recipient of misguided attempts to love. We struggle to love others well, and other people struggle to love us well.

A STRUCTURE TO HELP US UNDERSTAND EACH UNIQUE STORY

Each person's story is unique. Antonio seems to be a different person since returning from Iraq. He is distant from his wife and children and often explodes in rage at the slightest provocation. Carla is thirty-eight and longs to be a wife and mother. Now an engagement she broke off a decade earlier continues to haunt her. John and Sarah struggle to make ends meet financially with two children in college and a third child with chronic health problems. Olivia is a respected youth leader with a winsome knowledge of Scripture, yet she obsesses for hours each day about whether she truly is a child of God. Darren, a pastor in your church, just left his wife of twenty-eight years for his male lover, leaving behind a trail of devastated family members and congregants. These are the kinds of stories you will regularly hear if you are intent on loving others in the church. What stands out to you about each brief snippet of their stories? Is there anything that brings some unity amidst the diversity of their experiences?

While the specific shape and steps of ministry to these individuals should correspond to the particular realities and details of their experiences, Scripture gives us a kind of trellis—a basic structure—on which love can flower in person-specific ways. Though the Bible is not a technical operating manual like the detailed instructions that came with the unassembled bike you

just bought, it does provide foundational categories that can help you understand others—and yourself—so that we might live wisely and fruitfully as his people (Psalm 119:105, 130; 2 Peter 1:3–4). That’s what this whole book is about. In the next chapter, we will start by identifying three foundational and biblical ways of understanding your friends, family members, and counselees: saints, sufferers, and sinners.

Chapter 2

WHAT'S TRUE OF EVERY BELIEVER YOU MEET?

What is true of yourself and every Christian you meet, according to Scripture? What can you be sure about your spouse, your roommate, your child, your friend—even a brother or sister in Christ who is at odds with you?

First, you can be sure that they *struggle with identity* at some level—which means they are implicitly or explicitly asking, “Who am I?” That is, “What is my core identity? How do I fundamentally conceive of myself? What do I highlight when I tell my story?” Because this identity question is tied to mission or calling, it also means they are asking, “What is my purpose? What should I be doing with my life? How should I be living in light of my basic identity? What difference does it make that I am a person in Christ?”

Second, you can be sure that they *struggle with evil*. This struggle with evil expresses itself in two ways. They experience

evil from without (suffering), which means they are asking, “How do I deal with evil done to me? How should I persevere amidst the hardships and sorrows of my life?” They also experience evil from within (sin), which means they are asking, “How do I deal with the evil inside of me? How do I deal with the reality that ‘when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand’ (Romans 7:21)? Why do I struggle to live out of my identity? How do I change?”

You and I, and every Christian we meet, wrestle with these questions about identity and evil. This has been true ever since Adam and Eve deviated from God’s original design for humanity. Thankfully, God brings a welcome sense of clarity to this complexity. Oliver Wendell Holmes is commonly attributed as having said, “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” We all want truth that is simple and yet embraces the complex. Christians are blessed that God, in his Word, offers this to us. Scripture gives us basic—but not simplistic—categories for understanding our experiences as God’s redeemed image bearers.

HOW DOES GOD MOVE TOWARD HIS PEOPLE?

These categories become apparent as we observe in the Bible how God moves toward people. At a most foundational level, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ restores our identity as children of the living God (1 John 3:1–2) and he overcomes evil, whether in the form of suffering (Matthew 4:23–24; Acts 10:38) or sin (Romans 3:23–24; 8:3–4; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). But the story of redemption is much more fine-grained than simply asserting and proclaiming these foundational truths. As we look closer, we see that Scripture models ministry to God’s

people in three distinct ways. This, in turn, helps us know how to move toward one another so that we're not just guessing or completely flying by the seat of our pants. So, what does Scripture show us?

Scripture reveals that God ministers to his people as:

- *Saints* who need confirmation of their identity as children of God,
- *Sufferers* who need comfort in the midst of their affliction, and
- *Sinners* who need challenge to their sin in light of God's redemptive mercies.¹

Saint, sufferer, and sinner. All three of these are simultaneously true of every Christian you meet. If this is the way God sees and loves his people, then we should do the same, using these broad biblical categories to guide our overall approach to the people in our lives. They are signposts for wise love. They help you to prioritize one-another ministry, whether it's to your friend, husband, wife, roommate, child, coworker, or counselee.

WHAT ABOUT UNBELIEVERS?

These categories are true for every Christian, but what about unbelievers? Throughout this book, I'm going to focus primarily on relationships within the body of Christ, since I'm aiming this book toward helpers in the church. But let me offer an important aside on this question, because we all have family members and friends who are not Christians. Should we understand them the same way we understand other believers? Yes and no! Certainly, the most foundational biblical category that

1. See Michael R. Emler, *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2009), 74–79.

describes *all* people, both believers and unbelievers, is *God's image bearer* (Genesis 1:27; 5:1–2; Psalm 8:3–8). All people are created in the likeness of God, with its attendant moral, ethical, social-relational, and missional (vocational or ruling) aspects. As God's image bearers, we are his representatives, called to extend his good and wise rule over the earth (Genesis 1:28; 2:15). We work cooperatively in relationship as male and female image bearers to accomplish this noble task (Genesis 2:18). We are called to obey him (Genesis 2:16), as is befitting for the children of a holy God (Ephesians 4:24).

Sin distorts the image of God, but it does not erase it. Without Christ, we are totally deprived—sin affects every aspect of our personhood—but we are not as bad as we could be because of God's providence and common grace (Psalm 145:9; Matthew 5:45b; Hebrews 1:2–3). John Murray defines common grace as “every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”² Each person you meet is a recipient of God's ongoing common grace, but only God's people can be identified as “saints”—sons and daughters of the living God. By contrast, here are some examples of how the unbeliever is described in the Scriptures:

- A slave/orphan (Galatians 4:1–7; Romans 8:14–15)
- Living in darkness instead of light (1 Peter 2:9–10)
- A slave of sin (Romans 6:17)
- Alienated and hostile in mind (Colossians 1:21)
- Far off (Ephesians 2:13)

Yet, despite these characteristics, the foundational category of “image bearer blessed by common grace” remains active in an

2. John Murray, “Common Grace,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 96.

unbeliever. Because of this, Christians can approach them with eyes to see evidence of God's common grace in their lives, testify to God's saving grace made available through Jesus Christ, pray for God's kindnesses to lead them to repentance (Romans 2:4), and afford them the dignity that bespeaks an image bearer of the Creator of the universe.

Though unbelievers do not share in the identity of saint, the experiences of suffering and sin are common to both believers and unbelievers. In this way, we are more alike than different. Every person you meet has experienced bodily miseries, suffered at the hands of other people, or felt grief as a result of situational challenges and tragedies. And every person, believer or unbeliever, falls far short of even their own standards, let alone God's standards for holiness (Psalm 14:2–3; Romans 3:23). Sin is an ever-present reality.

Even here, however, there are distinctions to keep in mind. Although suffering is a tragic effect of the fall, it takes on a decidedly relational and redemptive significance for believers. Those who know Jesus are now yoked with him in their suffering (Philippians 3:8–11). They suffer in solidarity with Jesus Christ with the hope of the glory to come (2 Corinthians 4:16–18; 1 Peter 4:13–14). Similarly, although believers continue to struggle with sin in this life, their relationship to sin has been fundamentally altered due to the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit (Titus 3:3–7). As the apostle Paul says, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:2). For believers, sin is an act of betrayal against their new identity. For unbelievers, sin is an act in keeping with their current identity (John 8:34; Galatians 5:19–21; Titus 3:3).

So, while the fundamental experiences of wrestling with one's identity, enduring bodily, relational, and situational suffering, and struggling with sin are universal problems, the specific

contours of ministry will differ between believers and unbelievers as we employ the biblical categories of saint, sufferer, and sinner. Certainly, there is much commonality between believers and unbelievers in ministry approach, but I will also highlight differences to keep in mind as we move through the material.

For the remainder of this book, I will flesh out the categories of saint, sufferer, and sinner. My aim is for you to experience a greater clarity about how to love the people around you in wise, truthful, and compassionate ways. For each category, I will give an example of how Scripture models loving ministry to saints, sufferers, and sinners. And for each category I will give some practical examples of what that could look like in everyday relationships and in more formal ministry relationships. This doesn't mean that being mindful of the categories of saint, sufferer, and sinner will give you an exhaustive knowledge of the person before you. But these categories will help you press further into the relationship and prompt the kinds of questions and directions that will deepen your understanding of each unique person and give you specific ways to share the hope, comfort, and conviction of the gospel with those you are ministering to.

Chapter 3

JESUS CHRIST, THE ULTIMATE SAINT, SUFFERER, AND “SINNER”

Before traveling too far, it's important to connect our stories as saints, sufferers, and sinners with the story of Jesus Christ. Keeping Jesus central reminds us that these three categories are not abstract, but relational. We are saints, sufferers, and sinners in union with our Savior. He walked the path of humanity before us. He literally lived these experiences. He is the “founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus fulfills each aspect of our human experience. So how does Scripture point to Jesus as the ultimate saint, sufferer, and “sinner”?

JESUS, THE ULTIMATE SAINT

First, Jesus embodies saintly identity as the Son of God, beloved of the Father. A declaration of his identity occurs at his baptism in Matthew 3. When he comes up from the water, the Spirit of

God descends on him and a voice from heaven says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Peter later confesses that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). At the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1–8, a voice from heaven declares, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (17:5), an echo of the baptismal pronouncement. His identity as the Father’s beloved Son is forever sealed in the resurrection. The apostle Paul notes that Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4).

This familial language is significant. In Luke’s genealogy of Jesus, he ends with Adam, “the son of God” (Luke 3:38). He is not using “son of God” in an eternal divine sense, but in a relational, image-bearing sense. Paul describes Jesus as the second Adam, who perfectly fulfilled his role as the (human) son of God (Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:45, 47) as he, the eternal Son of God, became flesh (John 1:1, 14; Philippians 2:5–8). This was God’s intent for humanity from the beginning, to be children bearing his likeness in his world for his glory. We were to have dominion over all creation (Genesis 1:28), serving as rulers in God’s kingdom, which Graeme Goldsworthy describes as “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule.”¹ Adam failed in this noble and kingly task. But God’s design was not thwarted. From Adam’s descendants, God chose Abraham and then the nation of Israel to bear his image and be a blessing to the world (Genesis 12:2–3). God repeatedly refers to the people of Israel as his child, son, or children (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:20; Hosea 11:1, 10; Malachi 1:6). He refers to himself as Israel’s father (Jeremiah 31:9). King David and his descendants are also referred to with familial

1. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994), 46.

language (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 89:26–27), highlighting kingly or royal significance in bearing the identity of God’s children.

Ultimately, Israel and even the line of King David could not faithfully live out their identity as God’s children. Again and again, they rejected God as their father, choosing to follow other gods. As they turned away from their heavenly Father, they did not live in keeping with their identity. But Jesus is the obedient, faithful, loving son that Israel never was. He is the royal son, the King who ushers in his Father’s kingdom. He perfectly lived out his Father’s will and was vindicated by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:1–4). He now shares his place in God’s family with brothers and sisters (see Hebrews 2:10–13, 17) by pouring out his Spirit, whom Paul calls “the Spirit of adoption” (Romans 8:15). Paul captures it this way in Galatians 4:4–7:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Jesus is the perfect saint/son. What does that mean for us? When we turn to Jesus in faith, his identity becomes our identity. We become, like him, God’s favored child. In Christ, we are each an heir of the Father. Jesus the Son of God says, “I share my place in the royal family with you, fellow brother or sister. This is your new identity. Now you too can cry ‘Abba, Father.’” For believers, being a “saint” is not a title but a mark of familial identity.

JESUS, THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Second, Jesus embodies the experience of a sufferer. He is *the* Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52:13–53:12). After his resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus helped Cleopas and another disciple see that his suffering and death was God’s design throughout history. “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:26–27). Later Jesus appeared to a larger gathering, including the Eleven, and said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead” (Luke 24:46).

We often think of Jesus’s suffering in the context of his crucifixion and death. This is true, but in another sense, the whole of Jesus’s life comprised suffering. Paul captures this in Philippians 2:5–8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus suffered his entire life by setting aside his glory and rightful splendor. He faced the toils and trials every human being faces in a fallen world, all of the various evils “from without” that we experience, as I highlighted in our opening chapter. The writer of Hebrews describes him as the son who “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Earlier the writer

said of Jesus, “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18).

Jesus did not have, as we do, a sinful nature from which internal desires could arise that were at odds with his Father’s will.² But he did face all the external pressures that we face—yet without turning away from his Father in heaven. We see one example of this in the record of Satan’s frontal assault of Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism (Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13). Unlike Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus did not succumb to the painful pressures of satanic testing.

Jesus is the archetypal sufferer. What does that mean for us? It means that when we experience suffering, we can turn to Jesus—a brother and a friend who understands suffering from the inside. It means we can pour out our troubles to one who is a man of sorrows and familiar with grief (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus the Suffering Servant says, “I know your pain and your agony. I have triumphed over suffering and death and I have given you my Spirit, the Comforter, to be with you. I stand ready to pour out grace and mercy in your time of need” (see Hebrews 4:15–16).

JESUS, THE SINLESS ONE WHO BECAME SIN

Third, Jesus is the sinless one who became sin. He is not a “sinner” in the way we are sinners, of course. Although he was “made like his brothers in every respect” (Hebrews 2:17), he did not participate in our sinful nature. The writer of Hebrews makes this clear when talking about Jesus as high priest of a better covenant:

2. See Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 160–61.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (Hebrews 7:26–28)

Paul describes the significance of Jesus, the sinless one, being condemned in our place this way: “For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21; see also Romans 8:3–4). He became a curse for us so that through him we might receive the promised Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:13). He absorbed the full weight of human experience as sinner, having fully identified with us in our sinful condition.

In that sense, Jesus is counted as the archetypal sinner. What does that mean for us? Jesus—the Sinless One Who Became Sin—says, “I died to sin and rose again. I have given my Spirit to cleanse you from sin and to empower you to live in keeping with your new identity.”

Taken together, our heavenly Father makes you part of his family by sending his Son into the misery of suffering and the crushing weight of sin so that his children ultimately may be free of this double curse. This means that regarding ourselves and others as saints, sufferers, and sinners puts us in the closest possible relationship to our Savior Jesus Christ.

Understanding ourselves and others as saints, sufferers, and sinners gives a biblical framework for personal ministry. Whether we are talking with a friend, giving pastoral advice,

or counseling in a more formal setting, these categories can help us know where to start and give us a Scripture-based guide for our conversations. In the rest of the book, we will look at each aspect of saint, sufferer, and sinner more closely, applying these categories directly to our relationships and our counseling.