

# Loving Others as Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners (Part 1)



by MICHAEL R. EMLET

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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. But I know I overdo it. My family continues to tease 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 in navigating our world.

But don't you sometimes wish *people* came with operating instructions? “Just allow me to tighten your loose screw a bit and you'll feel better—and so will I!” Not that simple, right? 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?

We have to admit that the call to love one another that we see repeatedly in Scripture is not easy to carry out. There are many reasons for this but certainly one of them may be confusion and misunderstanding: “I don't really understand this person. I don't know where to begin to help.” Have

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you had that experience? Do other people ever frustrate or mystify you? Do you zig in a relationship and afterwards realize you should have zagged?

Where do we find guidance for loving family, friends, and counselees well? We go to Scripture. Though the Bible is not a technical operating manual like the detailed instructions that came with your new smart phone, it provides foundational categories to understand others—and yourself—in order to live fruitfully as his people (2 Peter 1:3–4). So, 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 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?” And 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?”

Second, you can be sure that they *struggle with evil*. This has two manifestations. 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 circumstantial hardships 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 good, evil is right there with me?’ (Rom 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 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 Scripture offers this to us. It gives us basic—but not simplistic—categories for understanding our experience as God’s redeemed image bearers.

These categories become apparent as we watch how God moves toward his 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 or sin (John 16:33; Acts 10:38). 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 in Christ,
- *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.

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 and use 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.

Note that I have said that these categories are true for every Christian, but what about unbelievers? For this article and in the forthcoming part 2, I’m going to focus primarily on relationships within the body of Christ, but let me offer an important aside on this issue. Certainly the most foundational biblical category that describes all people, both believers and unbelievers, is “image-bearer” (Gen 1:27–28; Gen 5:1–2). All people are created in the likeness of God, with its attendant moral, ethical, and missional (vocational or ruling) aspects. Sin distorts the image of God but does not erase it. Without Christ, we are totally depraved—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 (Ps 145:9; Matt 5:45b; Heb 1:2–3).<sup>1</sup> Each person you meet is a recipient of God’s ongoing common grace but

<sup>1</sup> 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.” *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 96.

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