

This Church Is For Sinners!

1 Timothy 1:15

“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

Redeemer Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky was planted in the 1950s under the ministry of N. Burnett Magruder. (He was one of the preachers in the sovereign grace conferences in the early-1950s conducted by Thirteenth Street Baptist Church in Ashland, Kentucky, pastored by Henry Mahan.) He was quite advanced in age in the early-1990s, and was leading the church in their search for his successor. Upon the recommendation of my dear friend Todd Nibert, a pastor in nearby Lexington, Kentucky, pastor Magruder scheduled me to minister to the church in Louisville on a Lord’s Day in the spring of 1993.

Upon entering the church’s meetinghouse, I immediately looked for its tract rack. For I have observed that much can be learned about a church by the literature it distributes. The first item to meet my eye in the tract rack was a tract pastor Magruder had written, and which members of the church distributed, titled **“This Church Is For Sinners!”**

And they meant it! That congregation of sinners warmly received this chief of their sort and called me to be their pastor. For the next fifteen years we sinners rejoiced in God’s grace for sinners, fellowshiped in Jesus Christ the Friend of sinners, delighted in the gospel of the One who saves sinners, and continued to tell people that **“This church is for sinners!”**

Churches of Christ must not be like the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day. Scribes were lawyers, experts on teaching the Law of Moses. Pharisees were the most rigid sect in Jewry in living according to the Law. Scribes and Pharisees were very legalistic. They “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9). They would say to sinners, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!” (Isaiah 65:5). They castigated Jesus because He was gracious to sinners. They treated the sinners to whom He was gracious in such a way as to say **“Our church is not for sinners!”**

We are not like them because we imitate our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And we desire the salvation of sinners, not their condemnation. Therefore, **“This church is for sinners!”**

Here are some reasons why **“This church is for sinners!”**

1. Jesus Christ came to save sinners;
2. Jesus Christ calls to salvation none but sinners;

3. Jesus Christ receives sinners and eats with them;
4. Jesus Christ is a friend of sinners;
5. God justifies all mercy-seeking sinners.

1. Jesus Christ came to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15):
“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

A “sinner” is one who has violated God’s law. If you have ever failed to perfectly keep even one of its commandments, you have sinned, and you therefore are a sinner. Jesus summarized God’s law in the First and the Second Great Commandments (Matthew 22:35-40 / Mark 12:28-31 with Deuteronomy 6:4f & Leviticus 19:18):

- The First Great Commandment is “You shall love Jehovah your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength”;
- The Second Great Commandment is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Sinners consequently include me, you, and everyone else:

- “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin” (Ecclesiastes 7:20);
- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners, not to *harm* them:

- This was God’s purpose in sending Jesus into the world (John 3:17): “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”
- This was Jesus’ purpose when He was in the world (Luke 9:56): “For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.”

No sinner is beyond the saving power of Jesus. For He has already saved the “chief” of sinners. He therefore can save you.

This church is comprised of sinners saved by Jesus, and is for them.

2. Jesus Christ calls to salvation none but sinners (Matthew 9:10-13 / Mark 2:15-17 / Luke 5:29-32):
“Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in [Matthew’s] house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, ‘Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ When Jesus heard that, He said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ... I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.’”

The “righteous” here are not the *truly* righteous, they who are righteous in God’s sight through Jesus Christ (as was Noah in Genesis 7:1).

Rather, the “righteous” here are the *self*-righteous, they who trust in themselves that they are righteous through keeping God’s law (as in Luke 18:9). They will not come to Jesus for salvation because “Those who are well have no need of a physician.” Jesus therefore does not call them to Himself.

As for these “sinners”: All people are sinners, “for all have sinned”. But the self-righteous do not consider themselves to be sinners, and distinguish themselves from them.

The “sinners” of whom Jesus here speaks are sin-sick and need a physician to make them well. Jesus calls them to repent of their sins, and they come to Him for salvation.

This church is comprised of sin-sick sinners called by Jesus, and is for them.

3. Jesus Christ receives sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2). This was a contemptuous complaint of the self-righteous against Jesus when “all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him” (v.1). Jesus not only received the sinners who came to hear Him, but also ate with them while answering their questions and conversing with them. Jesus does not shun sinners who come to hear Him.

Not only did *Jesus* receive sinners and eat with them, so did *His disciples*. This was evidenced at the conversion of Levi the tax collector (a publican), later known as Matthew the apostle (Luke 5:27-32). The new convert Levi gave a great feast to which He invited Jesus and His disciples, and also many of his fellow tax-collectors, assumedly to meet Jesus and to hear His teaching. The scribes and Pharisees, who characterized tax collectors as a worst sort of sinners, “complained against Jesus’ disciples, saying, ‘Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’”

We do so for good reason! We want sinners to hear of Jesus. We invite them to Him, and receive them if they come to Him.

This church is comprised of sinners received by Jesus, and receives all who will come to hear of Him, and is for them.

4. Jesus Christ is a friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19 / Luke 7:34). This also was a contemptuous complaint of the self-righteous against Jesus. For they despise sinners, and are friends with them.

But sinners who come to Jesus find in Him:

- “a friend [who] loves at all times” (Proverb 17:17);

- “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverb 18:24);
- He who epitomizes the truth that “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).

This church is comprised of sinners befriended by Jesus, and is for them.

5. God justifies all mercy-seeking sinners – and none but them (Luke 18:9-14): “Also [Jesus] spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’” And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me – the sinner!’” I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

To be “justified” is to be declared righteous by God. God does not justify they who justify themselves. For God will reject all who exalt themselves before Him, and boast to Him of their good works, and think they are better than others, and trust in themselves that they are righteous.

Rather, God justifies only they who confess themselves to be sinners, and acknowledge that they have no righteousness in themselves, and pray to God to be merciful to them.

This church is comprised of self-humbling and mercy-seeking and divinely-justified sinners, and is for them.

Therefore: **“This church is for sinners!”**

And we have good news for them (in the words of Joseph Hart):

*Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore,
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity joined with power:
He is able, He is willing; doubt no more.*

– Daniel E. Parks