

The Christian Quote that Everyone Takes out of Context

"[E]very saint has a past, and every sinner has a future."

A quick Google search for that Oscar Wilde quote will suffice to show just how popular it is. It's been engraved into jewelry, tattooed onto skin, and posted on Pinterest over picturesque backdrops of mountains or train tracks.

The meaning is simple and edifying: No one is so good that he hasn't failed at some point, and no one is so bad that he cannot be saved. All have sinned, and all is grace. The only distinction is between those who have already received it and those to whom it is still available.

It's a beautiful idea, and one that every Christian would do well to remember. There's only one problem. That's not what it means in context.

The line comes from Wilde's 1893 play [*A Woman of No Importance*](#) and is spoken by Lord Illingworth, a character whose hedonistic dandyism puts him in the same category with Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. These characters scoff at morality and live solely for pleasure. Their wit makes them funny and charming, but underneath they are seducers and corrupters who leave destruction in their wakes.

Here are Lord Illingworth's words in their proper context:

LORD ILLINGWORTH *I was on the point of explaining to Gerald that the world has always laughed at its own tragedies, that being the only way in which it has been able to bear them. And that, consequently, whatever the world has treated seriously belongs to the comedy side of things.*

LADY HUNSTANTON *Now I am quite out of my depth. I*

usually am when Lord Illingworth says anything... I have a dim idea, dear Lord Illingworth, that you are always on the side of the sinners, and I know I always try to be on the side of the saints, but that is as far as I get...

LORD ILLINGWORTH *The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.*

LADY HUNSTANTON *Ah! that quite does for me. I haven't a word to say. You and I, dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, are behind the age. We can't follow Lord Illingworth. Too much care was taken with our education, I am afraid. To have been well brought up is a great drawback nowadays. It shuts one out from so much.*

Lord Illingworth makes the bold-yet-sardonic declaration that everything that has traditionally been taken seriously, all the values of polite society and Christian morality, are mere jokes. Lady Hunstanton, a moral and proper Victorian woman, claims to be “on the side of the saints,” but admits that her rigid, careful upbringing renders her incapable of keeping up with Lord Illingworth’s scandalous new ideas.

Now the meaning is clear: Those who consider themselves saints are dull, static creatures. Their stories are over. Sinners, on the other hand, are exciting, dynamic, able to “develop in many directions,” as Gwendolen puts it in [The Importance of Being Earnest](#).

This beloved quote is not an acknowledgement of God’s grace, but a celebration of wickedness.

It’s true that Lord Illingworth and his philosophy are rejected by the play’s end, but in *A Woman of No Importance*, as in the rest of Wilde’s works, it is the hedonist who is the most interesting and memorable character. Like Milton’s Satan, he gets all the best lines.

Wilde's own public persona, complete with foppish clothing and flip witticisms, was of the same type, and his cheery amorality eventually landed him in prison for committing indecent acts with men. During his two years in jail, he wrote [De Profundis](#) ("Out of the Depths"), a short work chronicling his despair. At points, he seems to echo Lord Illingworth's ideas:

The world had always loved the saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God. Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man... To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his aim.

Here, once again, we have the boring saint and the fascinating sinner, the insistence that any debauchery must be preferable to the stifling artificiality of late Victorian society. But then, Wilde takes an unexpected turn:

Of course the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realise what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that: it is the means by which one alters one's past... It is difficult for most people to grasp the idea. I dare say one has to go to prison to understand it.

Wilde retains the idea that dynamic sin is preferable to bland conformity, but adds repentance as a necessary element. And so, a third definition of "every saint has a past" begins to emerge: it is only by becoming a saint through repentance that one redeems one's past, turning former transgressions into "beautiful and holy moments."

Wilde is still testing the limits of orthodoxy, but there is something to his claim. After all, the most dynamic sinners—[Mary of Egypt](#), [Ignatius of Loyola](#), [John Newton](#)—often

make the most dynamic saints, and don't their past villainies make them all the more delightful to us?

On his death bed, Wilde was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church and received Last Rites. It's possible that the sinner with a dark past became a saint and gained an eternal future. Maybe, just maybe, the popular misreading of that quote isn't too far off.

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