



Sermon

5th November 2023

Who is a Saint?

Revelation 7:9-11; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Borrowed heavily and with gratitude from a sermon by Richard Schwedes of Portland Heywood Lutheran Church ⁱ

Wednesday was All Saints Day. What is that about?

The book "For All the Saints," is an official publication by our General Synod. The article on All Saints Day says, In the New Testament "the saints" means all the believers who are dedicated to God. As such, the word has connections with the dedicated believers of the old covenant. In the Christian tradition particular honour began to be paid to exceptional examples of the Christian way, especially those who died for the faith, the martyrs. So the word "saint" came to describe those who have become officially recognised by the church as in some measure fulfilling their call to be saints. In the seventeenth century Jeremy Taylor [an Anglican Divine] wrote:

The memories of the saints are precious to God, and therefore they ought also to be so to us: and such persons, who serve God by holy living, industrious preaching, and religious dying, ought to have their names preserved in honour, and God be glorified in them, and their holy doctrines and lives published and imitated.

The article continues:

The feast allows us to express our sense of communion with all those who have gone before us, whether known or unknown, who have witnessed to their faith in Christ.

If you were to ask someone what they thought a saint is, how would they respond?

Many would probably say someone holy; someone who has done extraordinary things; a very special person; someone who has done nothing or very little wrong.

However, the Bible has a different understanding. From the book of Acts through to Revelations we see followers of Jesus being referred to as saints. And these weren't special followers of Jesus - they were everyday Christians. Christians like you - so in God's eyes you are a saint.

But you say hold on a moment the person sitting next to me can't be called a saint. You should know about their sins. In fact, how can I be called a saint, I sin?

Every Christian has sinned and all sins separate us from God. So being perfect isn't a criterion to be classed as a saint. Many of the people referred to as saints in the Bible had problems, they sinned. And not just in small ways.

Instead let's get God's perspective on what a saint is. From Romans 1:7,
"To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints."

Or from the Epistle to the Ephesians:

1:1 "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."

2:19 "... you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people (saints) and members of God's household..."

6:18 "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Being a saint does not start with what you do - it starts with God saying, "I love you; I call you to live your life for me."

When did you first experience this? ... And how do you experience it now? When you read your Bible; when you worship; when you share God's word with others; when someone comes and helps you; when you love others, without grumbling and without conditions; being a saint requires that we rely on God and are exposed to His love.

The term in the New Testament translated "saints" is simply the adjective "holy." To be holy is to be sanctified or set apart for God. How is this achieved?

Jesus referred to “those who are sanctified by faith in me.”¹ Paul wrote of Gentiles becoming “an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”² He wrote to the Corinthians, “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”³ The Epistle to the Hebrews refers to “the blood of the covenant that sanctified him...”⁴

Do you notice that all the work or doing is on Jesus’ part? We are made holy by faith in Jesus and his work of salvation. He shed his blood for our salvation; we are given his Spirit when we are born again. Through this salvation we are sanctified or made holy.

All Christians are sinners who have trusted in that saving work of Jesus. When we do that we are forgiven of our sin and declared by God to be holy. We were sinners because of our actions - we are saints because of what God’s action. Saints in other words recognise that they rely on Jesus’ death on the cross for their eternal future.

So let’s explore a couple of passages that highlight what it means to be saints.

Revelation 7:9-11

In John’s revelation, he sees saints worshipping God. They come with others from all walks of life, all situations, all nations. They acknowledge that their salvation can come only from God.

Bishop Tom Wright has done the Church a service in helping to clarify what we do know of things beyond the grave. He makes clear that heaven is not our final destination. No, our destination is the renewed earth with us in our resurrection bodies.

Before the resurrection, as this passage in Revelation appears to be, the spirits of saints are in what Jesus calls “paradise.” The word comes from a Persian word describing a carefully planted garden usually walled and irrigated with shady trees and beautiful plants for the pleasure of a wealthy family. In this afterlife state they are free from hunger, thirst and weeping. We have loosely but erroneously called it heaven. Jesus called it “Paradise” and “Abraham’s bosom.”

1 John 3:1-3

Saints are God’s children. Do you treat your children differently from other children? We all do – that relationship gives them privileges no one else gets. And that is how God treats his saints, as someone who is His child – as someone who has the right of intimacy and access.

John continues by stating that we don’t really understand the resurrection life we will inherit. The apostles saw a little of it in the risen Christ, but not enough to know what it really is. However, we know that we will be like Jesus when we are resurrected. Paul attempts to explain this resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15. He resorts to the comparison of a seed to the grown plant or the difference between the earth and stars. What we shall be is far more wonderful than these bodies, yet there is a continuation between these bodies and resurrection bodies – in the same way a plant is a continuation of its seed.

So, we are encouraged to place our confidence not in the things or people of this world, but in Jesus, who guarantees us this hope.

Matthew 5:1-12

And finally let’s hear again the gospel reading - let’s hear what Jesus says saints are like. As I read this I would encourage you to think who has been like this in your life? And when have you been like this and when have you not?

Now when he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,² and he began to teach them, saying: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you

¹ Acts 26:18

² Rom 15:16

³ 1 Cor 6:11

⁴ Heb 10:29

and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Each of us have benefited from saints. Because saints are people who point us to Jesus and what he has done for us.

A minister was talking to a small boy about a stained-glass window. The boy asked who the person in the window was. The minister said it was a saint. The boy replied, "So a saint is someone that the light shines through."

Who has shared God's love with you? They are a saint. With whom do you need to share God's love?

May God's light continue to shine onto you through the saints you know, and may it shine through you onto others.

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ⁱ <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/saints-are-richard-schwedes-sermon-on-discipleship-128637.asp>