

**Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17**

What does it take to be a saint? According to some, it takes being dead. Very few people are criticized after they die. Instead, remarks like, “he was a saint,” are often said. According to others, it takes the death of your spouse. “She was a saint for putting up with him for so long”...such a thought may not often be vocalized, but it may come to people’s minds more often than we might think. According to a classic song, saints are those who will “come marching in,” and according to football fans in New Orleans, saints are athletes who play on Sunday afternoons.

The world has its own set of saints, although a saint in God’s eyes may be someone altogether different. The world looks at good behavior, at noble intentions, at what can be seen in a man or a woman. In Matthew 5 Jesus speaks His Beatitudes, but did you know that the world has its own set of blessings? “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus begins, but the world says: Blessed are those who help the poor; blessed are those who are tolerant of other people’s opinions; blessed are those who care about others; who are patient; who serve in the line of duty. Philadelphia Phillies fans are blessing their baseball team for winning the World Series last week. If you follow the pope around long enough, you may get a blessing out of him. And if you sneeze at work, you may get a few “bless you’s” from fellow workers.

To be blessed by God, however, is to be a saint. All the blessings heaped upon you by the world, even after you have died, will not get you one inch closer to sainthood in the eyes of God. But to be called a saint by God, even though the world hates and despises you, is to be one of God’s blessed saints.

Just how important is it to you to be a saint? The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were saints of the world but they were not God’s saints. We may live like that much of the time. We prefer the praise and blessings of others more than the “blessings” of God. But the world’s saints will not necessarily end up where God’s saints do. In Revelation 7 it is the saints of God who enjoy forever the rich blessings of heaven. Here we see God’s saints in perfect peace, perfect joy, with no tears, or hunger, or thirst, no mourning, no death. Do you want to be a part of that great multitude? Do you want to be included with them? Friend, you already are.

When reading a book, we typically start at the front and read to the end. But today from the lectern, you heard first, the end of the story; and then you heard last, the story itself. Revelation 7 was read first, but that is how the story ends. Matthew 5 was read last, but that part of the story comes first. In Revelation 7 we see a picture of heaven, and every one of God’s saints is there; not just Mary Katherine, and Olga, and Vernon, and Robert who died this year in Christ; not just your loved ones who died in the faith in years past; and not just the saints of old whose stories are written down for us in the Old and New Testaments...Revelation 7 is your story because you are there even though, right now, you are living, and working, and going to school in and around Augusta, Missouri.

And so how did you get there? How did the Apostle John come to see you dressed in a white robe with a palm branch in your hand? How did you end up in heaven, as the story concludes, being one of God’s blessed saints? Jesus tells us in Matthew 5. “Blessed are

you...” He says, eight times. And each time it’s not due to something you did, but to something Jesus did and does for you.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...” He says; “Blessed are those who mourn...” You mourned again over your sins this morning as you and I confessed to God that we are poor in spirit—that we are poor, wretched sinners. This is God’s work in you. Your sorrow over your sins, your repentant attitude is not something you did so that now you are truly a saint...but you are blessed by God—His saint—because He made you who you are: a sinner who is penitent; a sinner who cries, “Create in me a clean heart, O God!”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” says Jesus. Having confessed your sins, you desire God’s forgiveness. You hunger and thirst for your Savior, and so you listen eagerly to His words: “I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And you come with expectation to God’s altar hungering and thirsting for Christ’s flesh and blood which is given here for you. And this hunger, as with your repentant heart, is not from you—it is God’s work within you.

“Blessed are the merciful,” says Jesus. “Forgive us,” we pray, “as we forgive others...” and this is now your heart and life. Having received God’s mercy you, as His blessed saint, extend mercy to those who hurt you; you forgive those who sin against you. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” says Jesus, “and the peacemakers.” Jesus is your peace. Your heart is pure because of Him. You have peace with God through Christ, and you extend that peace to others. You live with the peace of knowing that you are God’s forgiven saint even though you are a sinner, because Christ died for you.

You see, the world thinks one way, but God speaks with a different language. “Blessed are you,” says the world, “if you...when you do this and that.” Not so with God! With Him you are blessed because of what He does for you in Christ. That picture of heaven in Revelation 7—are there war heroes there; and police officers, and firemen who served others? Are there men and women there who helped others? Are there people there in heaven who were patient, and tolerant, and caring? Absolutely! But that’s not why they are there. They are there because of Christ. They are there not because the world called them saints, but because God did; because no matter what they did in life, they trusted in the Savior; they lived their life in Jesus.

That’s a saint. That’s a saint in Matthew 5, and that’s a saint in Revelation 7. From beginning to end, the story—your story—is all about Jesus. Without Him in your life, you are not a saint even if the world says that you are. Without the words of the living Christ working in your heart and life; without Christ’s Sacraments, not one of us would ever be a saint of God. But in Christ, for His sake and by the power of His Word and Sacraments, you are what God declares you to be—His blessed saint.

And so hearing and believing the word of forgiveness today you, friend, are blessed by God even if you don’t feel blessed. Hungering and thirsting for your Savior’s body and blood and coming up to receive His Sacrament, you are forgiven even if you don’t feel forgiven. And even though you and I have lived pretty poorly; even though we have neglected our Lord’s Word and turned away from doing His will; you, friend, are God’s saint even though everything in your life screams, “Sinner!” You are God’s saint, for Jesus took your sins to

His cross and right here and now He gives you His “saintliness,” His innocence and righteousness.

And so what, then, does it take to be a saint? It takes Jesus. That’s why, in Revelation 7, that multitude is praising Him—because He is the reason why they are there. And He is the reason why you are there. The story ends with Him because it begins with Him. The Jesus who is in Revelation 7 is the same Jesus speaking in Matthew 5. And this is the same Jesus who gave His life for you on a cross. It’s the same Jesus who is here now in Word and Sacrament for you. It’s the same Jesus who had you in His arms as you buried your loved ones in His name. And it’s the same Jesus who will call you by name when you die. He is why you are God’s saint; why you are God’s saint today, and why you will be God’s saint in heaven one day. And so, friends, because you know that your story ends with Christ in heaven, let us live out our story now in Christ as His blessed saints. Amen.