

## Revelation 7:9-17

November 1, 2020 (All Saints' Day)

“*Who are these...and from where have they come?*” If ever there was a time for a glowing eulogy, this would be it. These are the saints. Let’s hear it for them. Tell me of their works, how saintly they were. Hold nothing back from my ears. I want to hear of every blessed thing they did while they lived here on earth.

Yet nothing of the kind is spoken. “*Who are these?*” The answer that is given focuses not on what these saints did, but on what God did for them. They are marked by His grace, washed in the blood of the Lamb. With their mouths they cry, not “We did it!” but, “*Salvation belongs to our God!*”

How completely opposite is this from the way people envision it. The saints in heaven, it is widely assumed, enter in by their efforts, their works of charity, their avoidance of the worst kinds of sin. To be a saint is to be a good person. Yet these saints in John’s vision are far from good. I like the way Luther puts it on the back of our bulletin: “The saints of Christ must be good, stout sinners.”

All of these dressed in white were such sinners. No one enters heaven without having had a past; a sinful past. See over there? One of these saints in heaven is Abraham. He was a good, stout sinner. Oh yes, he trusted in the Lord God. He is the father of all who have faith. Yet he also doubted that God could give him a son through Sarah, and so he shared his bed with Hagar. Over there is Moses dressed in a white robe. In his past he murdered an Egyptian. We see David in this throng, he who murdered Uriah after sleeping with his wife. Peter and Paul are over there. Saints they are called. Yet Peter cowardly denied his Lord three times, and Paul in his past had been violent toward Christians. Keep looking and you see many who were publicans and prostitutes in their past. Great sinners, all of them, like Zacchaeus and Rahab. And see that man over there? He hung on a cross next to Jesus. In his past he was a thief, nothing but a criminal.

We read about the past lives of all these saints in the books of the Bible. Yet here in John’s vision these sinful pasts are not mentioned. It is as if their past lives, with all the sins they committed, have completely vanished. Oh, it does say they struggled. They came through great tribulation. This part of their past is mentioned. But the adultery, the murders, the thefts, these are all gone. All we see are men, women, and children dressed completely in white. They are sinners no more. Now they are only saints.

Friend, you cannot enter heaven without having had a past. What lurks in your past? What shameful things are hiding there? If you were running for public office on Tuesday, the media may bury all of your great sins for you...if you’re on their side, that is. But what about God? David tried to hide his sin from God, but to no avail. “*Your sins will find you out,*” He says in Scripture.

It is a good thing, pleasing to God, that we desire to live like saints. He wants no one to fall headlong into sin. But even worse than doing that is to deny it when we do. To shake it off as if our sin was just a bit of dust we can brush off of ourself.

Where is the struggle in that? These saints in heaven come through “*great tribulation*” it says. Not just persecution and martyrdom. The tribulation caused by sin. Struggling with it. Trying hard to avoid it. And if overtaken by it, enduring great sorrow in giving in to temptation. Troubled, greatly so, in offending God by such good, stout sins.

You and I are tempted to think as the world does: God’s saints are those who pray the most, who give the most, who love the best, who wear their religion on their sleeve for all to see. Yet this can pretty much describe the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. They were the saints in the eyes of the people, but not in the eyes of God. Do we ever see a Pharisee struggling with sin? Nicodemus, yes. God caused him to struggle as He brought him to faith in Jesus. Otherwise, no. These false saints were too good to be called sinners, as they referred to the publicans and prostitutes.

Here’s how it is. If you refuse to be a sinner, you cannot be a saint. To deny our sin is to reject our Savior, for He became sin for us. What do you see when you look at the cross of Jesus? A man hanging there? God dying there for the world? No saint would be content in just saying that. Here is what God’s saints say when looking at Jesus as He hangs from His cross: “There is my Lord dying for me because my sin is on Him. I am a wretched sinner. But my sin cannot be on me, for Jesus has taken it from me.”

Whether you have lived more like a saint or more like a sinner, your comfort and hope is in this, that because Jesus became the sinner for you, God declares you to be His saint. Stop looking at your life to verify your saintliness. But look to your baptism. There is your white robe, for there is Christ Jesus for you. Baptized into Christ, His holy life covers not just part, but all of you and all of your past. To be a saint is to be forgiven. This is what your baptism does for you. It is a daily washing away of your sins.

And so keep looking at that multitude dressed in white. Along with Abraham, Moses, David, and all the rest, do you see that person standing over there? Jesus is cradling that one in His arms. Friend, that is you. For you, too, are declared holy in Christ Jesus. You, too, are dressed in the white robe of your baptism. You, too, cry, “*Salvation belongs to our God!*” You, too, are forgiven. Amen.