

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## Out of This World

The Sunday After All Saints' Day  
November 6, 2011

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar  
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Matthew 5:1-12

**W**hen Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Tuesday was All Saints' Day, when the Christian church celebrates the lives of the huge multitude of people from every age who have been and will be saved out of the world by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We're observing All Saints' today. We have to be careful not to confuse it with All Souls', November 2. All Souls' celebrates "all faithful departed," the people who have died in Christ before us. All Saints' celebrates all those whom Christ has called, is calling and will call to himself. Celebrating all God's saints' is like throwing aside a curtain and seeing God's eternal reality laid out before us. All Saints' looks back to what God has been doing since the beginning of creation and it looks ahead to God's future universe full of blessing and joy.

Even though we sing, “the saints of God are just folk like me, and I want to be one too,” most of us don’t think of saints as “folk like me.” We define saints as people who are unusually holy and pious. The word “saint,” after all, means “holy one.” We see holiness as a continuum: holy at one end, and not so holy on the other.

Being holy is not a continuum or a scale. It is a category: holy and unholy. Human beings can make themselves look holy and pious to other human beings, but they can’t make themselves holy. Saints are the people Jesus has made holy through the blood of his cross. Through that cosmic transaction on their behalf, Jesus has removed their sin and guilt and made them like himself—holy. That’s why the New Testament persistently refers to ordinary Christians as “saints”.

Holy people have been consciously and purposely set aside by God for God’s exclusive use through Christ’s death. The people in the great multitude John sees in our reading from Revelation have **“washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:14)** The Lamb is Jesus Christ, the holy human being who gave his life in exchange for the lives of unholy human beings to make them holy.

All Saints’ throws back the curtain on the reality that Christ’s saints have been made holy **out** of this world. By “out of this world,” I mean he has chosen them for himself out of this world the way we choose apples out of a barrel. The difference is that we choose the good apples that look the best. We leave the bad apples. But when God comes to choose human beings, there aren’t any “best.” One rotten apple spoils the barrel, and the whole human race has been spoiled by sin. It is unholy.

This is very hard for most of us to grasp. We want to think that people are generally good. We want to think that we are for the most part, nice people. All in all, we think the world has a lot to offer. But All Saints’ Sunday confronts us with the jarring biblical reality that “pretty good” is light years away from God’s holiness and purity and perfection. The saints of God are not better than anyone else—they are simply those whom God, in his unfathomable and mysterious love, has chosen to make holy through the sacrifice of his Son Jesus.

This is also hard for us to grasp. From our perspective there’s no understanding or predicting whom God will make a saint. After all he chose Saul of Tarsus, a Jew who was dedicated to exterminating Christians. Listen to what Jesus told Saul, who became Paul, about his plans for Paul’s life: **“I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles--to whom I am sending you <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light**

**and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:17-18)** Jesus promised the rotten-apple persecutor, **“a place among those who are sanctified”**—that is, “made holy”—**“by faith in me.”** And Jesus describes the conversions of Gentile people as being **“turned from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.”** There is no movement along a continuum in what Jesus says. Jesus takes people from Satan to God by sanctifying them through faith in himself. He makes them saints.

When a sinner accepts Christ’s death for his or her sins, those sins are completely eradicated. The sinner becomes a saint. Christ then infuses them with his life and love in the Holy Spirit whom he gives to them. When Peter announced the astounding news that Jesus had died for their sins and been raised from the dead, people in the crowds in Jerusalem asked him **“What should we do?”** Peter said, **“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:17-18)** Repenting means turning your life around and living by the eternal realities All Saints’ confronts us with. Jesus’ saints share Jesus’s own character through his own life living in them. Out of all the rest of the human race, they are blessed. That’s what Jesus is saying in our gospel reading, the beatitudes. In these eight “blessed ones” Christ describes his own character. But true to form, Jesus doesn’t talk about himself here. He describes those whom he sanctifies by faith in himself and to whom he imparts his own life. Let’s look at the beatitudes briefly.

They start with **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** Anybody who’s played Monopoly knows what it takes to acquire real estate, Boardwalk or Park Place: money. But Jesus says it takes having no resources of your own to acquire the kingdom of heaven. The poor in spirit are the people who know they have nothing to give God. They rely not on their money or their status or their connections or their reputation, but only on God. Spiritual poverty is the deed to spiritual wealth in God’s eternal reality.

**“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”** Mourning comes from losing things. This is a world where we lose many things, and where mourning is very real and very painful. This world is full of mourning because of sin. Sin is not just intentional crimes and abuses people commit against each other. It is the whole broken system of human relationships and natural dangers and catastrophes and death that we endure. But Jesus assures his saints that God himself will comfort and restore them because he will eradicate all causes of mourning from the earth.

**“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”** In our world it’s the people who have power over other people who run the show. But people who are meek like Christ get out of God’s way. They give God room to rule them and his creation rightly. Jesus is the Son of God himself, but he meekly served and obeyed his Father in everything. He said, **“Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.”** (John 5:19)

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”** Judging from the obesity statistics, we are a nation of hungry people. God’s saints hunger and thirst not for food, but for God: for his righteousness, his rightness and goodness and beauty and perfection. Jesus gives his saints his own righteousness, his own right standing before the Father, as a gift. (1 Corinthians 1:30, Jeremiah 23:6, 33:16) He is our righteousness. True righteousness is a stranger in this broken world, but the Word of God tells us that Christ will create a new world **“where righteousness is at home”** (2 Peter 3:13) God’s saints are hungering and thirsting for it.

**“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”** Christ’s saints know that when they could not help themselves, God helped them by sending Jesus to make them holy through the blood of his cross. All around them they see the needs of those who cannot help themselves and multiply Christ’s mercy by meeting those needs, all the time receiving more mercy for themselves.

**“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”** This world cannot see God because its heart is set on “not-God”—on anything and anyone that promises help, relief, advantage, benefit, pleasure, comfort, rest—you name it. Genesis tells us that God sent the flood on the human race because he **“saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.”** (Genesis 6:5) Unlike an evil heart, a pure heart is simple. It sees what is, not what it wants to see. It sees the beauty of God in his love for the human race in Christ. It sees God at work in his world to bring people to himself.

**“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”** The Bible calls Jesus **“the firstborn among many brothers.”** (Romans 8:29) He is the firstborn child of God, who made peace between a rebellious human race and a holy God by his death on the cross. God’s saints make peace by calling human beings into reconciliation with God and with one another through the cross of Christ.

That is sometimes costly and unpopular, which brings us to **“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** The saints of God have been sanctified by faith in Christ’s cross out of this world. This world doesn’t recognize or understand Christ working in this world through them. John tells us as much in our second reading: **“The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know *him*.” (John 3:1b)** But whether the world notices or not, God’s blessed saints are his instrument to bring his blessing into this world that needs it so desperately.

That’s what our readings for today, and all of Scripture, show us. God’s purpose has always been to bring a holy people out of this unholy world. As Peter tells us in his First Letter: **“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)**

All Saints’ is our day! We who have put our faith in Christ’s death for our sins are God’s saints. We are **“among those who [Jesus says] are sanctified by faith in me.”** It is our high privilege to live in communion with him in this world and speak of his wonderful love, mercy, meekness, and righteousness with the people all around us who need his sanctifying and liberating grace. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for your wisdom and power in bringing a holy people out of the blindness and misery caused by sin into the marvelous light of your truth. We celebrate that great crowd of saints whom you have called, are now calling, and will call to yourself. Give us your grace and the power of your Spirit to boldly proclaim the sanctifying power of Jesus’ death and resurrection to the people around us who are blinded and imprisoned by the darkness of this world. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.