

November 5, 2017
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 23:1-12

Yes, Saints.

Today and this past week, Christians around the world are celebrating All Saints Day. It's a day we remember all the faithful people who have died. We remember grandparents, old friends, pillars of our community, all who set an example for us for what it means to follow Jesus. Those who led lives worthy of God, according to the apostle Paul. On All Saints Day, we give thanks for these people and pray that one day we will join them as saints in the everlasting life. But Jesus says today, don't wait to be a saint. Be my saints right now.

See, saints aren't just for heaven. They aren't folks in paintings with little halos around their heads. Perfect and pious and holier-than-thou. In fact, saints are the opposite of that. Saints are ordinary people whose hearts are pointed towards God in an extraordinary way. Who know that life is more than the world tells them it is. According to the Bible they are the poor in spirit. Those who mourn. Those who hunger for righteousness. The meek. The merciful. The pure in heart. The

peacemakers. The persecuted. Yes, those are saints, according to Jesus.

Yes, that is what a life worthy of God looks like.

The scribes and Pharisees, all the religious folks in Jesus' day, they also

wanted lives worthy of God. Like all religious people, they wanted to

know God and be faithful to God. They studied the Bible and discussed

God's commandments. And proclaimed God's goodness and the

goodness required of God's people. They promoted saintliness. Yes,

says Jesus, yes, that's right. Do what they say. These Pharisees know

what they are talking about. Listen to them. However, I don't want you

to live like them. Don't do what they do. They've got the words right but

the actions all wrong.

Jesus saw the Pharisees saying one thing but then doing something else.

They told people to be kind, but then they acted mean. They told people

to forgive, but then they held a grudge. They told people to live with

less, while they lived with more. They told people to put God first, while

they put themselves first. They told people to do one thing, but then they

did another. Maybe you know people like that. People who tell others to

live life right, but then don't do it themselves.

Well, Jesus had seen the Pharisees doing this and, quite frankly, he was angry. He saw them saying one thing and doing another over and over again and Jesus had had enough of these religious leaders and their phony faithfulness. He had had enough of them requiring one thing from others and another from themselves. He had had enough of their arrogance and self-importance and their attempts to prove him wrong. So, here and in the verses following, we have Jesus angry, giving a long list of criticisms against the Pharisees. And then a long list of condemnations against the Pharisees. Jesus holds nothing back here. Do NOT be like the Pharisees!, he says. Do not be like the religious people who talk the talk but don't walk the walk. Do not be like those who preach saintliness and godliness and Beatitude living, but aren't saintly or godly or even Beatitude-oriented in their lives. Do not be like them. Do the opposite of them.

Jesus' tone is extraordinarily critical here. And up to this point, Jesus has been more or less positive in his teachings. He has focused on how we ARE to live, rather than how we AREN'T. He shows us how we ARE to act faithfully by serving others, by going to the cross, by dying and

rising again. Life in Christ is not about being critical of others. Because that's not faithfulness. Constantly talking about how wrong others are, to make yourself look better. That's cheap spirituality. Saying, at least 'we aren't those people. And we aren't like them. And thank God we aren't immoral, hypocritical, and godless like those folks. If all you do is think about others, then you can conveniently ignore yourself. And that's where Jesus wants us to start. With our own words and actions. Being a Christian isn't about how others act, it's how we act. And we are to act like followers of a merciful Savior who gave his life for the life of the world, who seeks the lost and heals the sick and forgives the sinful and broken. We ARE followers of Jesus. And we want to live saintly lives. So let's think about Jesus' criticisms today in a saintly way. That they don't give us permission to point fingers at others. But they are lessons for living a life worthy of God.

The first lesson Jesus teaches us today is that as saints, we need to lighten up and we need to help others lighten up. He says, don't weigh other people down. Don't pile on expectations that others will be perfect. Don't expect perfect words from your parents. Or perfect actions from

your kids. Do not make someone's life harder with guilt or shame or finger-wagging. Don't add a burden to someone's life. Maybe you know what it's like to be around someone who puts burdens on others, who requires more of others, who asks others to be better and do better, but doesn't lift a finger to help. Jesus saw the Pharisees doing that. He saw them making things harder for others when it came to God. They made grace difficult to come by. But Jesus didn't want it to be difficult to know God's grace. And he didn't want his disciples to make it difficult either. So, saints, let's make it easy. For blessed are the peacemakers and the merciful. Blessed are those who lighten up people's lives instead of loading them down. So how can we ease the burdens of others? How can we help others with their heavy loads instead of adding to them?

A saint helps lighten up the world. And second, Jesus says, saints do their work quietly. A saint does NOT do good deeds so others will see them. Jesus saw 'religious people' in his day doing that. He saw them giving alms to the poor with great fanfare. Visiting the sick and announcing it all the way. Volunteering just so they could post it on

Facebook. Look at me, and my good deeds! But were they really doing it for others, or for themselves? Were they really doing them for God or for their own ego? Jesus says that a saint serves quietly. Without fanfare or drama or looking for a round of applause. Like the hospice chaplain who stays by the side of those who are dying. Or the person who pays the school lunch tab for a bunch of kids without anyone knowing it. The one delivering Meals on Wheels without mention. Those tutoring kids at school or visiting the homebound. The parents and grandparents and neighbors who do a thousand good deeds without anyone ever taking note. Yes, those are the saints.

A saint does what's right without needing praise or attention. So not everyone will recognize a saint. You might be sitting next to one right now, in fact. That's because Jesus says a saint does not look for admiration or a seat of honor. Remember the beatitudes: blessed are the poor and the hungry and the meek. Those who are not important or impressive. The world tells us the opposite. It tells us we need to be loved and admired. And now we have phones and a 24/7 news cycle and this crazy world-wide media stage. We are told to get as much attention

as we can. So that we will be special. So we will matter. But that's the opposite of what Jesus says and it's the opposite of how Jesus acted. Jesus was as special as you could get. The Son of God, the one seated at God's right hand. But he gave it up to come sit with us at this table. To hang out with laborers and children and women and sick people and those with mental illnesses and those with bad reputations. And in the end, nobody admired him or loved him. He was despised and rejected. And he died on a cross with hardly anybody there for him. Hardly anybody. Hardly even God. See, Jesus did not want a place of honor for himself; he wanted a place of honor for us. But the religious folks don't share that self-giving mission. And Jesus needed people who did. He needed disciples who were ok with that. People who were OK with being less than others, who could be smaller, who could be humble. Who could put God's mission first.

A saint does things quietly. A saint lifts the burdens of others. And lastly a saint treats everyone the same. Jesus says a saint does NOT seek great titles or designations. They don't try to be the very reverend anyone or make anyone else a superior so-and-so. Because evidently that's what

the Pharisees liked to do. They liked the idea of me up here and you down there. Just so we know how much everyone is worth and who matters most. No, Jesus says, no. The saints are the persecuted and the pure in heart. Not the grand poohbah of this or the president of that. All of us have a place in the Kingdom and all of us have a role to play. And we all matter equally to God. The manager and the custodian and the CEO. So don't look down on others, ever. And don't idolize anyone because of what they have or who they know. Everyone is a pilgrim. Every person is just another human being in need of a Savior.

A saint seeks to live a life worthy of God. First, by lifting others up instead of weighing them down. Second, by quietly serving without need of recognition or reward. And last, by treating everyone with respect, the greatest and the least of these. Because you don't need to be perfect or famous to be a saint. If you are easing the burdens of others, you are a saint. If you are offering mercy to others, you are a saint. If you are quietly cleaning up the kitchen, helping with youth group, looking out for your brother or sister, loving your enemy, visiting the lonely, lending a hand, giving a dollar, working for the dignity for everyone, listening,

watching, waiting for Jesus. Doing what needs to be done so that everyone has a place at the table. Yes, you, with the heart turned toward God, you are a saint. You, who are poor, thirsty, hungry, persecuted, grieving, in need. You, with the footsteps following your Savior, Jesus. You are saints. Yes. Saints.