

The Prophets Who Were Before You

All Saints' Day 2017

Pastor Josh Frazee

Matt. 5:1-12

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“...(T)herefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify (God’s) glorious name...” That’s what we’ve heard in our Divine Services all year: that we worship along with the very company of heaven when we have our services here on earth. And the company of heaven includes the angels—the seraphim and cherubim and mighty creatures of the Old Testament—as well as the saints who have passed away before us.

Those saints are the Church Triumphant. They are the ones who have gone into heaven ahead of us and are before our God and Father, eagerly awaiting the Second Coming of Christ, just as we do here. They are the ones experiencing what we can only hope to in the future. They no longer need to come to God for forgiveness, but we do.

That’s what happens at our Divine Services—God offers and freely gives forgiveness. But more than that, we are connected to the full company of heaven in worshipping and praising God in thanksgiving.

God serves us His absolution, His Word, His own Son’s body and blood for our forgiveness, and we respond with all the company of heaven, singing His praise. On Sunday mornings, especially when we share Communion, we receive a Foretaste of the Feast to come.

Some of the songs we sing are the very songs going on in heaven. “This is the Feast” from Revelation chapters five and nineteen; and the Sanctus from Isaiah chapter six. These we sing with those who have fallen asleep before us.

But while the saints of the Church Triumphant are there, they are not the only saints. We are saints now, even though we will receive glory at a future time. That’s what Jesus tells us in our text from the Sermon on the Mount.

Verse 1

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Right in this opening line Jesus delivers a powerful message. He calls those who are following Him “blessed.” This is a judgment. It is a statement made about the disciples—not of their own worthiness, but rather, because they are not worthy. They are empty. They can bring nothing to God but their sinfulness and need for forgiveness. They are the ones who are “poor in spirit,” and so Jesus pronounces them “blessed.”

It has been this way throughout Scripture, and regarding those we now call saints, referring to the fact that they have passed away and are asleep in the Lord. Abram was called by God, not because he was a righteous and devout Jew. No, he was called because he was an idolater living in a world of false belief. By calling Abram, “God demonstrated that it is not by works but by grace that we are saved (Know the Bible Now, p.23).”

So also were Jacob, Ephraim, and David empty. They had nothing to offer, and weren’t even the firstborn sons. Yet when God showed them His favor, He “emphasized that the promise does not come by obligation, rights, or works, but by miraculous, undeserved grace (Know the Bible Now, p.35).”

Indeed these great leaders of old were saints, and by the time of Jesus teaching the disciples upon this mountain, they had been sainted. Yet Jesus judges those gathered around Him at the time of His sermon “blessed.” He said about His disciples who were poor in spirit that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “(I)s”, present tense—not was, or will be, as is the case for the remaining beatitudes, but “is”, present tense.

This judgment is also yours, and for the same reason. It is by your unworthiness—your coming to God empty and a sinner that He has judged you to be “blessed.” Thus you are currently a saint, and the following beatitudes are those things which are coming your way by means of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Verse 2

The next several beatitudes close with “...for they shall...” They are joys that will be granted to the disciples, and to us, at a future time.

Today we are sinners needing to confess and be absolved. Today if we hear God’s voice, we should not harden our hearts (Hebrews 4:7). Yet today we are also saints according to the grace given to us by our Lord Christ Jesus. But at a future time, we shall receive glory.

That is the message we hear in our Epistle text from 1 John. “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” We will see our Lord Jesus with our own eyes because we will be in glorified, restored bodies for His sake.

At a future time, we shall no longer mourn, hunger and thirst for righteousness, or need to be instruments of peace. On the great and majestic day of our Lord Jesus, He shall return, bringing with Him all those saints who have fallen asleep in Him. We who remain will be gathered up with them, we shall be judged righteous—not for works you and I have done, but for the sake of Jesus’ life in our place—and we shall be ushered into the new heavens and new earth for life everlasting.

As we heard last week, it’s all about Jesus. Those who have been sainted and have fallen asleep in the Lord are there because of Him, not because of any work they did in their lifetimes. In the same way, you and I will only be with Him because of Him—not because of any work you or your family have done for or in the church.

Our best works are nothing but filthy rags—at best—when it comes to earning salvation. We cannot do it. Jesus has done it for us, and He has done it all. We cannot add anything to what He has done. The prophets and apostles of old did not. Luther did not. And you and I have not and will not. God has deemed you “blessed” because you come to Him as nothing but poor, miserable sinners in need of His salvation.

Verse 3

Jesus closes the beatitudes with another present tense verse. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

As saints, the disciples would endure many hardships for the name of Jesus. The prophets of old had to, and even those who follow Christ today do the same. How can we expect any different if the world rejected Jesus our leader?

The disciples had left everything to follow Jesus, and yet that is not all that they would face, as we well know. Luther faced persecutions of his own. Today we face the same.

But again, Jesus judges us “blessed” and gives us righteousness. The commentator Lenski puts it this way: “They confess their faith and live up to it in their lives and thus prove obnoxious to the world which visits persecution upon them...Because their whole character and their life, as approved of God, constituted a standing rebuke to the world, indicating God’s judicial disapproval of the character and the life of the world, the world turned against them and thus persecuted them (St. Matthew’s Gospel, Lenski, p.195).”

The righteous do not bring persecution upon themselves but by being righteous in Christ Jesus, it is put upon them by the world. But just as the adjective “righteous” is applied to them by the grace of Christ Jesus, so also is the ability to stand firm on Him. That is what the prophets who were before you did, and that’s what Jesus gives you the ability to do as well in His death and resurrection. Today, you are His saints, you are His righteous, and you will have persecution put upon you. But rejoice and be glad, because today you have His grace, and in the future, you will receive His glory with the same prophets who were before you. All this is given in and for the sake of Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.