

WE ARE ALL SAINTS

A man was arriving home from a business trip. His wife picked him up at the airport, and as they were driving home he noticed that she passed the street where they would normally turn. When he asked her why she didn't turn there she said that they wouldn't be going home because there were much-needed repairs going on there. Alarmed, he asked: *"What repairs?"* *"The garage needed repairs,"* she answered. *"Why?"* he inquired. *"Because it caught fire,"* she responded. *"Caught fire!"* he said. *"How did it catch fire?"* *"Oh, sparks from the house, I suppose,"* she replied. *"What?"* he yelled. *"The house caught fire?"* *"Uh huh,"* she replied. *"That's why we're staying at Marvin's Manor." "Marvin's Manor?"* he screamed. *"That's a horrible dump!" "Don't worry, honey,"* she said. *"None of that's true. The only bad news I have is that I burned the roast and we're going out to dinner!"* Her husband was so relieved they had a wonderful time together, celebrating the fact that the house hadn't burned down. It reminds me of the *Wizard of Id* episode where the king gave his state-of-the-union address in which he informed his subjects that the good news was that there was no bad news and the bad news was that that was all the good news he had.

Today's Gospel lesson might remind us a little of that. According to Jesus, what would normally be considered bad news is no longer bad news. In fact it's very good news. Boiled down to as few words as possible it goes like this: Since you have become my disciples you are now blessed to be poor in spirit, mournful, downtrodden, thirsty, hungry, defamed, persecuted and slandered. Jesus had quite an orientation program for His disciples, didn't he? Imagine an employer today opening an orientation program for new employees, saying, *"Now that you've signed on with us you will be poor, mournful, downtrodden, thirsty, hungry, defamed, persecuted and slandered."* And you thought your lunch break was too short!

Clearly, Jesus is turning common sense on its ear. No reasonable person yearns to be down and out, and yet we have it on his divine authority that that's exactly where we will be the most blessed. What in the world can he mean?

What Jesus is doing here is telling us how we can become saints. Do you know what a saint is? You may be surprised. Many people think of saints as religious superheroes—Christians who distinguished themselves by performing extraordinary acts of faith—martyrs who died for their faith or performed miracles or served the Lord in other dramatic ways—people like Joan of Arc or Mother Theresa. If that's what you think a saint is you're going to be surprised and pleased to learn that becoming a saint isn't a matter of what you do for God; it's a matter of what God does for you, *and in you*. Becoming a saint is simply a matter of receiving a treasure that God has prepared for you—a treasure which is called the "Kingdom of Heaven." Jesus describes how we receive this treasure in terms of a **process** God leads us through and which he uses to change us from sin-loving, idol-worshipping creatures of this world into spirit-filled, God-worshipping citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. This will be an expository sermon, so if you'd like to follow along in your bulletins [*inserted on page 4*], we'll see how it works.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Before we can receive the spiritual riches God offers us in the Kingdom of Heaven, we first have to want them. And in order to want them, we first have to face up to the fact that we don't

have any spiritual resources of our own; that apart from God, we are spiritually destitute—impoverished—bankrupt. Once we face up to this God creates a hunger in us for the spiritual riches He has to offer. That's why it's a blessing to be "poor in spirit": we don't long for what we already have; we long for what we don't have. It works the same way as it does with material possessions: you only long for what you don't already possess. The comedian Richard Pryor used to do a routine where he played a televangelist who was responding to letters his viewers were sending in which were critical of his opulent lifestyle. *"You people keep sending me letters saying 'Get rid of your fleet of Cadillacs. Get rid of your penthouse. Get rid of your string of women! Well that's easy for you to say because you HAVE none of those things!'"*

This is why Jesus said that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It's not that riches are immoral or wicked or that rich people are immoral or wicked. It's just that when you think you already have everything you need, it's tempting to think that you don't need anything else—including God. You have to be hungry to want food; you have to be spiritually hungry to yearn for the spiritual riches that God offers in the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Our initial response to becoming aware that we are spiritually bankrupt is to mourn and grieve over our lost condition. But this grieving brings a certain comfort—the comfort of knowing that we are finally dealing with the truth about ourselves and not with illusions. This is called humility—the knowledge that we lack something vital, something that we desperately need.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." When our pride has been broken, when we have been humbled by self-knowledge and are aware of our need for help, we become meek and are ready at last to inherit the kingdom God has prepared for us.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." As meek and humbled creatures we know that we have no righteousness of our own, that any righteousness we can have has to come from somewhere else—somewhere outside ourselves. This is the righteousness that Paul describes in *Romans 3* as *"a righteousness from God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."* God delights in sharing His righteousness with those who hunger and thirst for it. This hungering and thirsting after God's righteousness is the essence of faith: the hand of a beggar reaching out to receive a gift from a King. And, having received God's righteousness, we are justified before God and reconciled with Him. Then—and only then—we are ready to do "kingdom work."

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." God's righteousness is not inactive—it begins to bear fruit in us—thankfulness and praise toward God and the desire to serve our neighbor.

"Blessed are the pure/clean in heart for they shall see God." God's righteousness begins to cleanse our hearts. We may still sin outwardly—indeed, we most certainly will continue to sin in our thoughts and words and actions—but our hearts are now inclined toward God rather than toward sin. We used to enjoy our sins without remorse; perhaps we even felt entitled to them. But now, as the bumper sticker says, *"Christians don't stop sinning; they just stop enjoying it."* We would rather NOT sin and we regret it when

we do sin because the Holy Spirit is at work in us, sharpening our conscience and leading us to repentance. And while we occasionally lament the lost ability to enjoy our sins without pangs of conscience, we are slowly being made fit to live in the presence of God. We have the first fruits of heaven: a foretaste of the feast to come when we will see God face to face.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” Once our hearts are being cleansed, we find that we have more and more peace with God—a peace, Paul says, that surpasses all human understanding. (*Philippians 4:4-7*) This peace begins to make itself known to others through our words and actions so that they long to have it as well. Thus we become peacemakers: not in the sense of resolving conflicts between our fellow human beings, but in the sense of creating in other people a hunger to have the same peace with God that we have.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The Bible says that in the end there are only two groups of people: the righteous and the wicked. The righteous are those who walk with God and share in His righteousness. The wicked are those who reject fellowship with God and choose to walk alone. In this world, the wicked oppress the righteous, because it is the nature of fallen man to exalt himself over his neighbor rather than love and serve him. Therefore the righteous can expect to be persecuted in this world and find their only real joy in the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus said to His disciples on the night before he was crucified: *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* Not “reformed” the world, mind you, but **overcome** the world.

And there you have it. Becoming a saint isn’t a matter of what WE do, but of what God does in us. Rejoice, then, because you and I ARE among the saints we honor today as we celebrate All Saints Sunday. Saints are simply people who have received the Kingdom of Heaven through faith. Thank God that it doesn’t depend upon us, who are poor in spirit, but upon God who is rich in spirit and Who wants to impart His spiritual riches to us. You and I will change and not all of our changes will be for the better. We will fail God and we will fail each other. But God, who is faithful and just, will never fail us.

Amen.

Matthew 5:1-12 The Sermon on the Mount

5 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

The Beatitudes

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.