

“When the Saints Go”

Romans 3:19-26, 5:1-8

[53] Welcome. It is a great day to be in God’s house. Turn to the person next to you and tell them, “God loves you more than you know.” In a world with so many negative messages, we need to hear more good news, and there is no better news than the gospel.

Would you pray with me? Lord, you are wise, just, loving, and forgiving. You do not treat us as our sins deserve, and for that, we are eternally grateful. Meet us in the place, God, and show us the amazing gift of your grace in Jesus Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen.

[54] There once were two notorious brothers in the mob, Don and Joe. When Joe died, Don approached a pastor in town to officiate his brother’s funeral. This mobster offered the pastor a million dollars if he would say, at the service, that Joe was a saint.

The pastor agreed and all the town came to the service, curious what the pastor would preach. The pastor began by saying, “Most of you know what a crook Joe was. He was the epitome of evil. He lied, he cheated, he stole, and he ruined people’s lives.” The pastor continued with personal, detailed examples of Joe’s crimes. Don sat in the pew, seething with anger. Then the pastor concluded by saying, “But compared to his brother Don, Joe was a saint!”

[55] This story illustrates a truth: most people, if asked, would appreciate being called a saint, if it was sincere. As you might know, Monday was All Saints Day, a religious holiday started by the Roman Catholic Church long ago. I was curious how one actually becomes a certified saint, so I looked it up. It’s a very tough process.¹ Step one: You have to die, then wait for a long time, at least five years. Saint Bede had to wait 1,164 years for sainthood. Step two: A bishop must investigate your life to see whether you were holy and virtuous enough to even be considered for sainthood. Step three: You must be scrutinized for evidence of “holiness, work and signs that people have been drawn to prayer” through your example. Step four: There must be verified miracles confirmed for people who have prayed to you, the would-be saint. This supposedly is proof that

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27140646>

you are already in heaven, and hence able to intercede with God on others' behalf. And finally, Step five: you have to be canonized in a special service.

For our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church, saints are important for prayers, connecting with God, and honoring those who have passed away. But clearly, not everyone becomes a saint, according to their definition.

[56] So what does the Bible say about saints? The word "saint" appears 65 times in the NRSV Bible. St. Paul himself often calls the people of his churches "saints," although the NIV translates it as "holy people." Paul writes to "the saints in Ephesus," (Eph 1:1), "the saints in Philippi" (Phil 1:1), and "the saints in Colossae" (Col 1:2) These people are "holy" or "set apart." If Paul wrote a letter to us today, he might address it "to the saints in Houghton at Grace UMC."

Saints, living and deceased, are the people of God. They are people who are set aside, chosen for God's purposes, and most importantly, have heard and responded to God's message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

[57] You might not call yourself a saint. You might think, "I'm not Saint Ignatius, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Jude." Yet the Bible indicates that anyone can become a real saint, and you don't even have to die for it; someone else already did.

Unlike at the Vatican, in the Bible you don't need verifiable miracles, a pope, or a mass to become a saint. The Apostle Paul spells out the how and why in Romans, specifically, in the verses in chapters 3 and 5, which we read today.

[58] The first step is to get drafted by the NFL team in New Orleans. Just kidding! Actually, the first step to becoming a saint is to understand that there is a God. God is the awesome, powerful, mighty, and holy being who created the whole universe, who gave us this beautiful earth, who created and loves you, and longs for you to enjoy a loving relationship with him and worship him.

[59] St. Paul believed that every person on earth could experience God. By simply observing nature, you can see the evidence for God. Paul claims that "what may be known about God is plain to [us]" (Romans 1:19) and that all people were "without excuse." (Romans 1:20)

[60] Many people have seen evidence of God in nature. However, I think the best evidence for God is simply found in a mirror. Do you know that the odds

of you being born were a billion to one against? You are a living miracle! God really does make himself plain to us. Although we have the choice whether or not to see it, God really is there, and Paul says, we have no excuse.

[61] The second step is to admit we have a problem. No one is born a saint. Paul spells it out for us: No one is righteous in God’s eyes. (Romans 3:10) We are all sinners by nature, rebels against the Holy One. By our own judgment, we would find ourselves guilty. Without Jesus, there would be no hope for us to become saints, by any definition.

[62] It is difficult to admit our brokenness. It is difficult to confess our sin and our pride, and to repent. It’s the hardest part of becoming a saint. There is no glory, no fame in admitting that we are dead in our sin.

[63] The third step to become a saint is to believe that Jesus died to save you. We discover this awesome truth in Romans 5:8 – Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Notice the tense of the verb: we were sinners. Something happens when you trust Christ for salvation. You become justified, made right, and restored in God’s eyes. Through Christ, God no longer holds your sins against you. God no longer sees you as broken and flawed. God sees his beloved Son in you. God sees his Holy Spirit working in your life.

[64] We are justified by faith and faith alone. Real faith. Deliberate faith. Not the faith of your parents or grandparents or even your pastor. Your own faith, expressed by words and actions of gratitude because someone loved you enough to die for you, before you even knew him.

How do you become a saint? You only become a saint by trusting in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and surrendering every part of your life over to him.

That’s a tall order. Then again, being a saint is special. The most worthwhile things in life are not easy.

Over and over again, Paul says that righteousness comes by faith. Access to grace comes by faith. There is no other requirement to be a saint other than to have an active, living faith in Jesus Christ.

[65] Do not worry if you are not perfect. Saints do experience setbacks. But because of faith, we know those setbacks will become something better.

Saints persevere. Saints don't give up. In the game of life, when you're down, you still keep playing. Saints never lose hope.

We need more saints in this world, living saints. Far too many people live in this world in despair. They have no hope for life. No hope for healing. No hope for a future. No forgiveness for the past. Many have become so bitter that they don't even look for good news anymore. They turn on the news, expecting it to be bad. They expect other people to be corrupt. They build little castles expecting someone, someday, somehow, will ruin everything they have worked out. They have lived under the burdens of these expectations for so long, they no longer look for good news.

[66] Church, the gospel is good news. Never forget that. That's why we repeat Romans 5:8 in our communion liturgy. “Hear the good news. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That proves God's love for us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you and I are forgiven!” Glory to God!

A saint is someone who decides to turn from their sin and follow Jesus. It really is that simple. Everyone can become a saint – Jesus died for all sinners and rose to life for everyone's justification. This is not 2000-year-old news. Today is the day of salvation. All are offered this precious gift.

[67] Look in our bulletin for a moment. Perhaps not all the names there were saints. But they are all children of God. They are all precious to God. One of the reasons I celebrate All Saints Day in the church is because sometimes we just need to grieve together. Some of these people lived long lives. Others died tragic deaths. God loved every single one of them, yet their journey on this earth is over.

Church, remember your saints. Remember those who died, and honor them. Remember God loves them. But most importantly, remember that Jesus died for you. That is one-of-a-kind, divine, reckless love. If you have never fallen in love with Jesus, do it today. Become a saint, right now. Receive communion with all the saints here today, and experience the love, joy, and peace of God, available to you through Jesus, who loves you enough to die for you, and proves his love is unstoppable by rising from the dead. You can become a saint by trusting Jesus, and you should.

Let us pray....

Memory Verse: Romans 3:22 (NIV)

“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

Reflection Questions

1. Whom in your life would you call a “saint”? Why do they deserve that title?
2. What conclusion do you draw from Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory”? Is this bad news or good news? To whom does it apply?
3. What things in your life do you try to “hide” from God? How well does that work?
4. Romans 5:6 says that Christ died for us while we were “still powerless.” In what ways have you felt powerless? How does it feel knowing that Christ died for you?
5. What does the statement, “I believe in Jesus” mean to you? Is it just historical information, or something more?
6. Would you like to live with God in eternity? Have you completely surrendered your life to Jesus? What would it take for you to make that decision?