

The Feast of All Saints' Day, November 1, 2020

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Saints? Blessed Beggars All!

Matthew 5:3

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Seeing the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain, and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And He opened His mouth and taught them, saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven" (vv 1–3).

Since today is All Saints' Day, it's fitting to ask: What makes a person a saint? What's at the core of being a saint, a holy person? What do all the saints have in common, that **great multitude** whom St. John sees **standing before the throne and before the Lamb** (Rev 7:9)? And, to make it personal, how do we become saints, if that's even possible and it's not already too late for us?

TO BE A SAINT IS TO BE A BEGGAR BEFORE GOD,
AND TO BE A BEGGAR BEFORE GOD IS TO BE BLESSED
WITH THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. *[repeat]*

That's what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: **"Blessed are the poor in spirit—the beggars—for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"** (v 3).

I.

Now I doubt that we picture beggars when we think of saints. What do you picture when you think of saints?

We may picture the saints as we see them in icons or religious art. They're the people with those halos—called nimbuses—around their heads. You can pick them out because of their aura, the glow around them.

Or we may think of those who were persecuted and martyred for being Christians. St. John the Baptist with his head on a platter, St. Stephen stoned to death, St. Simon sawn in two, Sts. Perpetua and Felicity fed to the lions, St. Lawrence who was roasted like a pig on a spit, or the Christians who just this week were stabbed to death in France and the Orthodox priest there who was shot. The martyrs are worth remembering.

Maybe we call to mind great Christians of the past who were known for their bold and faithful teaching, like St. Irenaeus, St. Athanasius, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, or C.F.W. Walther. It's good for us to know who they are and what they taught.

Maybe we remember Christians whose lives were marked by virtue and sacrifice in service to their neighbors. Here I think of Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian in the Netherlands who helped preserve the lives of Jews during the holocaust, survived a concentration camp, and later forgave her captors. Or Mother Teresa who was dedicated to caring for the poor and the lowest castes in India. Or William Wilberforce in England whose Christian faith motivated him to work for the end of slavery there. Such acts of love are worthy of emulation.

Now having such images of saints isn't wrong; in fact, it's quite good. We can and should thank and praise God for all of them, and for so many others! We can follow their examples in our various callings. Husbands, you would do well to follow the example of St. Joseph, guardian of our Lord. Mothers and grandmothers can look to Eunice and Lois who passed on their faith to Timothy. We can model friendship after Barnabas, whose name means son of encouragement. And there are so many other saints down through the centuries—teachers, laborers, leaders, widows, artists, musicians and on and on. May we be bold to follow in their footsteps—doing good, proclaiming truth, creating beauty.

And yet that's *not* what makes them saints.

When St. John sees the saints in Revelation chapter 7, he sees a **great multitude that no one can number** (Rev 7:9). A multitude whose names God knows, but we don't. A multitude whose lives we've forgotten, but whom God remembers. They, too, were farmers and fathers and wives and factory workers and pastors and business owners and citizens and youth. It's not just a select group of the famous or noteworthy or notable. Revelation doesn't give us a "Who's Who" of saints.

In fact, if we were to ask the saints, even the famous ones, what makes them saints, they wouldn't point to themselves at all. They wouldn't show off a halo around their heads. They wouldn't draw attention to what they've done or how they've lived or died. They would say, "Who, me? A saint? I'm not worthy of being one. Why, I'm just a beggar."

What are saints? Beggars all! It's not their glory that's remarkable, but their poverty. In Revelation, the saints **clothed in white robes** and **with palm branches in their hands** cry out and sing the very same thing you do: "**Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!**" (Rev. 7:9–10).

II.

So, to be a saint is to be a beggar before God. Now I hope that all of us aspire to be saints, but I suspect that few of us aspire to be beggars. Who wants to be poor in spirit? We would much rather be someone or something. We would like to have the kingdom of heaven because we've earned our place there, not because God has pity on us.

But the Church isn't made up of the high and mighty and worthy. The first Christians were poor and humble. Mary herself was but a lowly maiden. The widow of Nain was alone in the world. The Canaanite woman was happy to be treated like a dog. Blind Bartimaeus was an actual beggar who cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" There were tax collectors and prostitutes and drunks and lepers and children and fishermen. Jesus went to the highways and byways and gathered the dregs of society to Himself. He gathered beggars around Him. The poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty is more fitting for our Lord: "Give Me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore." And they came to Him. In the first centuries of the Church, Christianity was criticized for being a religion of women, children, and slaves—for being a religion of the powerless, of beggars!

Now there are different kinds of beggars, so let me be clear what I mean. There's the beggar who makes all kinds of promises about what he or she will do. I mean the kind of beggar who says, "I'll work. I'll dig ditches. I'll rake leaves. I'll even clean toilets. I'll do anything. I'll pay it off." That's not really begging. It's more like an attempt to cut a deal, to make a bargain—not to beg but to earn what they receive. To be honest, I don't trust that kind of beggar. I trust the beggar who simply says, "I've got nothin'. I can't do anything, give anything, pay anything. I'm unworthy and undeserving, but I beg you because I'm in need." There's an honest man. There's a woman who knows herself.

Before God, the saints are that kind of beggar. Before God, we are that kind of beggar. To call ourselves beggars before God isn't a statement about God. It's a statement about us. We're *not* saying that we have to beg to get God's attention. Not at all. He doesn't need to be begged. But we most certainly *are* beggars. To be a saint is to come before God with this confession: "I'm a poor, pitiful, miserable sinner. I deserve nothing from You except wrath and condemnation. I'll never be able to repay You. To put it simply, I'm a beggar, and I know it."

Martin Luther is an example of this. We certainly thank God for this great reformer and doctor of the Christian faith, but his last words, written on a scrap of paper in his pocket, were these: "We are beggars; this is true." Those words teach us a lot. We are all beggars. There's nothing else we can be. All our righteousness and all the personal righteousness of the saints is like filthy rags.

III.

To be a saint is to be a beggar before God, but to be a beggar before God is to be blessed with the kingdom of heaven. God puts His gifts into empty hands. He fills the sack of the one who confesses that he has nothing. Jesus Christ came to deliver the kingdom of heaven to beggars. **“Blessed are the poor in spirit,”** He says, **“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”** (v 3). The focus isn’t on what the poor in spirit do but on what they’ve been given. They’re given the kingdom! Jesus is the great giver. By nature we look down at and dishonor the poor man, but not Jesus. **“Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which He has promised to those who love Him?”** (James 2:5).

Jesus not only loves the poor in spirit, He became poor in spirit. **“Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich”** (2 Cor 8:9). What are saints but the poor who have become rich in Christ? What are saints but those whose empty hands have been filled with Christ’s gifts? What are saints but poor, pitiful sinners forgiven in Jesus name and by His blood? What are saints but harassed and helpless sheep whom Jesus shepherds through the valley of the shadow of death into His green pastures? **“The reason the world does not know us,”** St. John says, **“is because the world did not know Him”** (1 Jn 3:1). The world looked down at the poor, humiliated, crucified Jesus, even as it looks down on the poor in spirit. But Jesus looks down from the cross with mercy on all beggars!

What makes the poor in spirit blessed isn’t their poverty but the riches of Christ. That great multitude pictured in Revelation, who are they? **“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”** (Rev 7:14). They are the saints, the blessed poor in spirit, the persecuted and martyred, the beggars who deserve nothing but in Christ have everything. They are one, holy communion of beggars, all covered by the blood of the Lamb! But what strange beggars they are. They aren’t clothed like beggars. They are clothed in glorious white robes. They have palm branches in their hands. They are singing a new song of victory. They are protected from hunger and thirst, from sorrow and sadness, from sun and heat. Beggars taken up into the kingdom, and now no longer beggars but sons! **See what kind of love the Father has given to us beggars, that we should be called children of God. . . . Beloved, we are God’s children now, but what we will be has not yet appeared** (1 Jn 3:1, 2). They serve God day and night not as beggars but as sons and daughters of the kingdom.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, here we live before God as beggars, but there we will serve Him as sons and daughters. Here we find ourselves empty, but there we will be filled with good things. Here we struggle to survive, but there we will inherit the kingdom prepared for us. Here we sorrow and mourn, but there every tear will be wiped away. Yes, though we die as beggars, yet we shall live with Jesus and be raised with Him to eternal life. Not because of anything we've done, but because of everything He's done. All because of Jesus.

So what are saints? Blessed beggars all! Beggars to whom Jesus gives the kingdom of heaven.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
