

In Nomine Iesu

All Saints Sunday 2021

Come to the family reunion – Matthew 5:1-12

“And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

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

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

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

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through whom we are blessed. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

There is a lot of talk about victorious living in churches today. Christians are urged to attend this or that church because there, they are told, the way to live a victorious life is taught. The implication is that it is one thing to be a believer and quite another to be a Christian living a victorious life. Victorious Christians are better husbands and wives, and have children who are happier and healthier. Victorious Christians don't get sick as often or as badly. They don't have money problems like others. Victorious Christians follow life principles carefully drawn from the Bible by celebrity preachers and singers who themselves look victorious on TV or in the videos and pictures to be found on their church web sites, book jackets, and album covers. Victorious Christians, the message seems to be, have whiter teeth and nicer hair.

Then there is the rest of humanity: concerned because of family troubles or lonely because they have no family, tired from overwork or empty because there is no work, worried that they will not have enough money or numb because they do not have any, saddened because they have not attained the American Dream or empty because they have, and it does not satisfy. Their teeth are not white. And their hair, well ...

I

But, dear friends, don't believe the false advertising. The victorious Christian of the sort some preachers hold forth for you to envy comes from Madison Avenue and not the word of God. According to God's word victorious Christians are called saints.

What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'saint'? Mental pictures of men and women long dead, whose relics are enshrined in ancient cathedrals? Images of people so spiritual that they are free of sin? God's word gives us another picture. It shows us that saints are believers in Jesus Christ who are declared holy for His sake. For that reason the Apostle Paul, for example, writes to "the saints in Corinth" or "to all God's beloved in Rome, called to be saints." In other words, saints are Christians.

The Bible speaks both of the saints who are in heaven before the throne of the Lamb singing hymns of glory in praise of their Redeemer and also of saints who are here on earth, who join together with “angels and archangels, and the whole company of heaven,” to sing the praises of the same Lord who is adored in heaven.

Whether in heaven or here on earth, saints are not self-made. They are declared saints by the Lord whose blood has won salvation for all and who declares blessed all who are His by faith. That takes us to the Holy Gospel for All Saints’ Sunday. We know this section of the Holy Scriptures as the ‘Beatitudes,’ ‘the blessed.’ The well-respected theologian Martin Franzmann summarizes the meaning of today’s Gospel when he writes, “Jesus’ beatitudes declare what He is and what He gives.”

Leaving for a moment the “poor in spirit” of the first Beatitude, let us consider each of the beatitudes that follow: Jesus is the One who mourns. He is “well-acquainted with grief,” says the Prophet Isaiah. He wept over Jerusalem for she did not know her Messiah. But when He rose from death the power of His victory over death brought joy first to Mary Magdalene, then to Peter and John, then to the twelve, then to more than five hundred at once, and then to thousands and millions. Jesus, who is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God” was not ashamed to humble Himself to be born of a Virgin, coming to us in meekness, gentle and lowly in heart, moving ever onwards to Calvary, suffering, and death. To Him now is given “all authority in heaven and on earth,” because of which He sent His disciples to all nation to bring His inheritance to them. He was and is thirsty for our salvation. And by His suffering and death He has obtained for us the righteousness of God. Sent by the Father, who so loved us all, the Son is merciful as the Father; and because of His mercy toward us, He has obtained mercy for us who were lost in our sin. Jesus was pure of heart, and with single-minded obedience did the Father’s will in all things, and so enabled us to see the Father, who so loved us. He is the Peacemaker, because He reconciled us to His Father in order so that we truly could be the sons of God. He was persecuted for righteousness’ sake by the unrighteous in order to give to all who believe in Him true righteousness in the sight of His and our Father in heaven.

They who are “poor in spirit” have been made rich by Him who became poor for us. To them, Jesus says, belongs “the kingdom of heaven.” He has made them blessed.

II

And so today, All Saints Sunday, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses to these things. Why do I say surrounded? Because here, gathered in Jesus’ name, we are in His presence, even as He promised. (Matthew 18:20) And He, as the last book of the Bible, Revelation, shows us, is surrounded by all saints in heaven. Here in the hearing of His pure and unchanged word, in the receiving of His body and blood, given and shed for us, we are joined through Him to all those who have gone before us in the faith. We are surrounded by those who knew weakness and sin, who keenly felt every trouble and temptation we know. We are surrounded by those who sang, sometimes well and sometimes poorly, but with deep conviction, hymns of victory to the Lamb. They walked – and sat and stood and kneeled – as we do. Dearly beloved, we are not walking alone on our pilgrimage to the City whose Builder and Maker is God. We are walking in the company of all the saints of heaven on their way to join them. Although we are still plagued by sin and weakness, we share a blessed, sweet communion with those whose rest is won.

Some of you have come to church on this All Saints Sunday bearing fond memories of spouses, parents, grandparents, or other loved ones who died in the faith. I tell you, they are at the same communion table with us today, for there is another side to this altar that the human eye cannot see. There, on the other side of the Lord's Table, are those who once kneeled as we do to receive Christ's body and blood for forgiveness and strength. There are they who were sinners just as we are but who also were declared righteous for the sake of the Lamb who laid down His life for us. There are they who now rejoice, having died in the Lord only to be raised to life everlasting, having died, perhaps, in poverty, loneliness, and sorrow, they now rejoice in the midst of a family as large, as numerous, as the sand on the sea shore, as the stars in the heavens. Here in time and space we eat and drink the body and blood of the Lamb of God while they feast at the marriage banquet of the Lamb that will never end. They are the cloud of witnesses who surround us today. Their suffering and shame are gone. Their tears are wiped away. Their joy knows no ending. They live in the victory of Jesus Christ, the crucified and arisen.

When we come to hear Jesus' promise of victory, to receive the true body and blood of Him, who, once crucified, dead, and buried, is now alive forevermore, we have come to nothing less the family reunion, the assembled family of God.

We are one with them. Yes, it is true, to use the words of that majestic hymn which we will sing as we receive Christ's life-giving body and blood, "we feebly struggle, they in glory shine." But we are one with them in our Lord Jesus Christ. They were redeemed by His blood, and so are we. They were baptized into Christ, and so are we. They gladly came to hear God's word of promise even as we do. They are the Church Victorious, and we will have the same victory. It is faith alone, God's word proclaims that makes us members of this family, not what we have done, are now doing, or ever will do. It is faith in what Christ our Lord has done. He cried out, "It is finished," (John 19:30) so that we might hear, believe, and live forever. (John 20:30-31) Dear friends in Christ, the victorious Christian's life is not marked by whiter teeth or nicer hair. That is false advertising, devilishly false. The victorious Christian is marked by the lowly and humble Gospel in word and sacrament, the Gospel that imprints the image of Jesus on our hearts and gives us His victory.

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Today we are given a glimpse of the future that awaits us, a glimpse of the glory yet to come, a foretaste of the still greater family reunion that is coming, greater because the day will come when we will not be joined to them only by faith, but will see them and be seen by them in heaven. Today we press on; we run the race set before us with all the strength and consolation the Gospel gives. Our Lord is faithful. He will bring us to His heavenly kingdom in His own time. For He alone is both the Victor over sin and death and the One who makes us victorious Christians, His own saints, even as it is written in the book of Revelation: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." So come to the family reunion every Sunday, knowing that the greater and eternal family reunion awaits you! Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

S. R. Sparley, 11/6/2021