

# “A Saint’s Reward”

## Matthew 5:1-12

November 3, 2013

All Saints’ Day

We’ve always been taught or have come to assume that if you do the right thing, then good things will happen to you. If you worked hard and were always on time, then you would get the raise, get the promotion, and eventually retire with a gold watch from the company where you had begun working 40 years previously. In our unstable times, people are finding this assumption not to be true. You do the right thing and good things do not happen to you. Bad things happen to you. Hard working honest people are finding that their hours are getting cut, wages are being reduced, and no one works for the same company their entire career. You can easily become discouraged for doing the right thing and not being rewarded for it.

As we celebrate All Saints’ Day, we rejoice that we are saints in the kingdom of God – declared by Him to be holy by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We may also operate under the same assumption as mentioned before. If you faithfully follow Jesus Christ, then good things will happen to you.

Some people think that, if you believe in Jesus, then you should be physically blessed with the things you want and need. You’ll hear some preachers making this claim to their people. The message is sometimes referred to as a “name it and claim it” theology or “the prosperity gospel”. According to this belief, God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, and happy. If you just have enough faith and put it into action, then God will give you the wealth and possessions you desire. God will cure you of your diseases and keep you in good health. God will make you happy all the time.

Is that how you, as a saint in the Kingdom of God, find your life going? Do you have everything you want or need? I don’t think so. Christians suffer physically along with everyone else. Sometimes we suffer worse because we are faithful Christians. We find ourselves poor compared with the wealthy of this world. We may experience great sorrow and disappointment in life for which we mourn. As we age, no matter how hard we pray and believe, our bodies begin to break down.

We may not see as well as we used to, hear as well as we used to, or even walk as well as we used to. We get sick more often and more seriously. And we will die. When we celebrate All Saints' Day, who is that we remember? Saints who have died. This year, we remember Kathy and Patsy, both of whom were faithful to their Lord, yet suffered greatly from disease before they ultimately died.

This might cause us to change our thinking. Maybe we shouldn't think about earthly things, but spiritual things. If we do the right thing spiritually, then the right thing will happen to us spiritually. If we just share the Gospel in just the right way, people will come flocking to our church, begging to become members. When I was a young boy, I can remember thinking that being a pastor would be a great job. I would get to talk about Jesus and people would gladly listen. After all, who wouldn't want forgiveness for all of their sins and eternal life in heaven? As I grew up and became a pastor, I found out that there were plenty of people who didn't think they needed forgiveness and who did not believe in life after death.

Even if people are not interested in the Gospel, we think that, at least, they will respect the Bible and treat Christians kindly. That may have been the case long ago, but it is not today. People freely reject the Scriptures and the doctrines contained therein these days. Whether it's teaching on creation, life issues, sexual morals, and the like, people will mock those who hold to Biblical teachings and sometimes even persecute them for having those beliefs. Such persecution is happening around the world. It is beginning to happen here.

It's not easy being a saint – a faithful follower of Christ – in these latter days. We do the right thing and get the wrong response from people. It can be very discouraging and unrewarding to follow Christ. We are tempted to shut up and no longer confess the teachings of Scripture or share the Gospel. We are tempted to change what we believe and do, thus going along with the crowd in our beliefs and our actions. We are tempted to just give up.

But don't. There is a reward for God's saints. But that reward has never been the things of this world or the acceptance by the world. Nor has that reward been earned by God's saints for their saintliness. We live as sinners in a sinful world. None of us deserve to be saints by our own actions.

We would like to think we have been faithful in following Jesus, but we have not. Even our best actions have been tainted by sin. We have not done the right thing and suffered wrong. We have done the wrong thing and still suffered lack of material blessings and the rejection of this world. Jesus is the only one who was faithful to His Father's will. Yet Jesus still endured deprivation and suffering. He did this in order to pay the price for us to become saints and to receive the reward of saints.

We think we have led a deprived life and missed out on the blessings of this life. Jesus has done more. The Bible says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9) Jesus Christ, the Son of God, left His throne in heaven and became part of His creation. He gave up the riches of heaven to experience the poverty of personhood as a man. St. Paul writes of it, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (Philippians 2:6-7) Jesus was weak, tired, hungry, thirsty, and poor. Even though He was completely faithful, He did not have the good things of this life, not even home. As He once said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Luke 9:58)

But He wasn't doing this to show off His toughness or even as an example to us of faithfulness in suffering. He became a man – a human being like all of us – in order to pay the price for humanity's redemption. By being faithfully obedient to His Father's will and sacrificing His life on the cross – doing the right thing even while suffering – Jesus was able to wipe away our sins and give us His righteousness so that the Father might declare us to be holy (that is, "saints") in His sight.

We think that we have been maligned, rejected, and persecuted in our lives as Christians. Christ has suffered more. Isaiah prophesied of the Messiah in the familiar words, "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for

our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:3-5) Jesus was hated by man and rejected by His Father on the cross so that we might be loved and accepted by our Heavenly Father now and forever.

This changes the way we live. Our text for today, commonly known as the Beatitudes, is not a list of directives which we try to accomplish, but are descriptions of who we already are and what our state of being is. Even in our poverty and our persecution, Jesus says that we are “blessed”. This is more than a feeling of happiness, but it is a sense of profound joy from our share in the salvation of the kingdom of God. This blessedness is our reward as saints.

We are blessed in this life. We are sinners who are “poor in spirit”, that is, we have absolutely nothing spiritually because of our sin. Jesus says we are blessed because the Kingdom of God is ours. We have nothing by which to earn it. God gives it to us freely for Jesus’ sake.

We mourn in this life because of sin and its effects in our lives and in the world. . Jesus says we are blessed for God will comfort us. We are meek - weak and lowly in this life compared to those who are strong and proud, seeking to gain the world, but Jesus says we are blessed because we will inherit the earth. (Or, as one commentator put it, “We inherit the whole shooting match!”) We see our sin, the consequences for sin, and the judgment against sin and we hunger and thirst for righteousness – God’s salvation and rescue. Jesus says we are blessed because God will satisfy us with full deliverance and complete salvation in the world to come.

Being in the Kingdom of God by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection transforms us in our life and actions. Jesus has shown us mercy and we show that mercy to the world. Jesus says we are blessed for God continues to show us mercy. Our hearts are cleansed from sin through the shed blood of Jesus and become pure and clean. Jesus says we are blessed because, in that state of holiness and purity, we shall see God. Jesus has made peace between God and us through His death on the cross. We share that peace with the world. Jesus calls us blessed because God will call us His sons.

As faithful followers of Christ, we will be persecuted for righteousness' sake. People will reject us, revile us, and persecute us. Jesus not only says we are blessed when this happens, but we should rejoice and be glad. For no matter how bad this life becomes for following Christ, our reward in heaven is even greater. Jesus rose from the dead so that we might rise from our graves and live eternally in heaven.

Our first lesson today from Revelation gives us a taste of what it will be like. We will be in the direct presence of God on His throne, praising and serving Him day and night. We will be free from sin. We will be free from all of its effects. Of the saints in heaven, St. John writes, "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:15-17) That's us. That's what we have to look forward to with all of God's saints past, present, and future.

Back in the 1950's and 60's, a Negro spiritual by the name of "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" became influential in the American Civil Rights movement. African Americans were urged to not be distracted or dismayed by the suffering going on around them and in them, but to "keep their eyes on the prize" – the reward that would one day come if they persevered. It might not be a bad theme for All Saints' Day as well. While we are grateful for being declared saints by God, it often seems frustrating and discouraging. But keep your eyes on the prize. Realize that you are blessed –joyful in your salvation now - in your life, even when you are deprived or persecuted. Remember that a greater reward waits for you in heaven. – one that is far more wonderful than you can imagine and one that never ends. We rejoice for Kathy and Patsy who have now come to realize that reward. We also look forward with great anticipation for the time when we can join them. Until then, in all difficulty and persecution, keep your eyes on the prize. Amen.