

**“Aspiring to Genuine Sainthood”**

**Matthew 5:1–12**

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“Saint” is a term most of us shy away from, and this is probably a good thing. Thinking too highly of ourselves is not a Christian virtue. Humility is. But most of our resistance is based on misunderstanding. We tend to think of saints as only those who have been canonized and we think of them as being nothing like us, almost angelic, as close to perfection as a human being can be, and none of this is accurate.

Saints are not perfect people. If we have any doubt, we need only recall that the Apostle Paul wrote two letters to the church at Corinth and both address the people there as saints. If we have read those letters, we know they were not perfect. Furthermore, the reference is not just to a few early believers who receive formal church recognition. It is to all who are “sanctified in Christ Jesus,” all of the early believers.

The Greek word we translate as “saint” means “holy one” but it lacks the pious baggage we attach and refers to people set apart by God for a different kind of life, a distinctive kind of life made possible and modeled by Jesus — and this is something to which we all aspire. So, the truth is we are all saints or at least are all called to be saints in this sense, followers of Jesus in his radically different kind of life. This life is described throughout the New Testament, but the verses we have read today from the Sermon on the Mount provide a concise summary of it.

At first glance, we may not see anything radically different here. The Beatitudes are so familiar to us that we don’t find anything unusual in them. They almost lull us to sleep like a lullaby — blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. Blessed, happy, peaceful, Kum Ba Yah, La La Lu... But when we examine these sayings more carefully, it becomes clear that we are talking about a radically different set of values and way of life.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit, or as Luke puts it, the poor? So much for the Prosperity Gospel, the idea that God blesses the righteous with health, wealth and success! Blessed are the meek? An old cartoon says the meek may inherit the earth, but if they do, the not so meek will take it back very quickly! Blessed are the pure in heart? No rewards are wasted there because no one is pure in heart. Blessed are those who mourn? Only those who don't mourn can buy that. Blessed are the persecuted because they get rewarded in heaven... well, maybe we get that one, but it still seems like a sadistic game — we suffer in this life so that we can be blessed in the next?

This is not a lullaby; this is not an affirmation of the obvious; it is a picture of a way of life very different from the one championed by our culture. One writer has compared the Beatitudes to COVID-19. This virus has turned the world upside down. If we embrace the Beatitudes as our way of life, we will turn the world upside down.

U2's latest album *Songs of Experience* includes this modern update of the Beatitudes that is vocalized by rapper Kendrick Lamar.

Blessed are the arrogant, for theirs is the kingdom of their own company.

Blessed are the superstars, for in the magnificence of their light we understand better our own insignificance.

Blessed are the filthy rich, for you can only truly own what you give away... like your pain.

Blessed are the bullies, for one day they'll have to stand up to themselves.

Blessed are the liars, for the truth can be awkward.

This is the announcement of a revolution, not the words of a lullaby!

And yet, what exactly does this mean? How exactly are we called to live? What does it mean to be blessed? People use the term all the time as if it is something as common as salt or toilet paper. "Have a blessed day" people say, as if the words have some kind of magic. The term is sometimes translated as "happy" but it refers to being happy or

content deep down, not in superficial ways. And we generally think of a blessing being linked to God. So, the blessed are made content by God in some way. But exactly how and when?

The blessedness of the persecuted is directly linked to a reward in heaven, and some imagine all the Beatitudes functioning in this way. Live in this different way and God rewards us with eternal life. Saints go to heaven! But eternal life is not just about the next life, it is also about a qualitatively different experience of this life.

So, how exactly does this work? Some imagine an immediate reversal of fortune — the poor get rich, the meek become powerful, the pure in heart go straight to the top of the heap. But this is simply not the case. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was killed in a concentration camp, Mother Teresa lived among the poor all of her life, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. So, how do these blessings work?

The reward of living a faithful life, a saintly life, life as God intends with humility and a hunger for what is right, with purity of heart and a peacemaking spirit — is living that life. There is an old story about a father telling the young man dating his daughter, “Son, whoever marries my daughter will get a prize.” The wide-eyed young man replied, “Really? What is it?” The prize of that marriage is the daughter. The reward of faith is the experience of living as God intends.

Yet Columbia Theological Seminary New Testament professor Raj Nadella suggests that we might find another clue to understanding how blessings work in the second beatitude ([workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Our translation, like most, reads, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” and it is a nice, reassuring word. But Nadella points out that the Greek word *parakleytheysontai*, part of which should sound familiar — *paraklete* — involves more than comfort.

It was used in courtroom settings in first-century Greco-Roman life and it referred to lawyers and advocates interceding on behalf of people needing assistance. The word includes a sense of being advocated for, not just being comforted. Understood in this way, the beatitude takes on greater meaning. The mother who mourns her son or daughter who was killed is not only comforted but advocated for, which is to say that the underlying issues that led to her sadness are addressed.

Yet the question remains — by whom? Who will advocate for this woman and all who suffer? God is always at work to bring about what is right and just, but we are called to pursue justice too, to advocate for those who mourn and those who are persecuted, to hunger and thirst for what is right. And even the victims of suffering are included in the solution, they too have agency, power to contribute to healing.

So, while we pray for and trust in God's pursuit of what is right and just, we are called to partner with God in this work. This means serving as advocates for the mother who has lost a child to violence, whether in a wrongful police shooting or by a malevolent neighbor, though systemic racism could be involved in either case. This means advocating for the veteran who has come home from an unpopular war and thus not only suffers with PTSD but has to endure the lack of compassion and the judgment that should be directed toward the politicians who make decisions about war.

It means advocating for immigrants fleeing poverty, violence and persecution; welcoming them in tangible ways; and fighting for needed policy changes. It means advocating for people with an array of life challenges like the loss of sight or hearing, an inability to walk well or think clearly, an addiction or the fact that they have been incarcerated. Offering comfort helps promote healing, but addressing the underlying causes of suffering provides healing at a deeper level. Some grief is unavoidable. This life is temporary for all of us. But there is so much unnecessary suffering in this world. God's people, followers of Jesus, saints, are called to do something about the latter.

When I consider people who have taken this calling seriously, I think about Jacqueline and Eugene Rivers who are connected to the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies at Harvard University and who have invested their lives in fighting injustice. I think about the people who started Oak City Cares, an organization that ministers to the least of these in need in our community. I think about people in our church who minister to many in need through our clothing ministry and Toy Joy. And I think about those who have participated in peaceful protests and prayer vigils in this time of renewed awareness of racial injustice. All of these people are saints in best sense of the term.

Do we aspire to this kind of sainthood? Do we want to be different in these ways? We should, especially in a time like this, for the world desperately needs gentle souls and pure hearts, people who seek what is right and just in everyday life, peacemakers and justice advocates, those who will speak up for all who are oppressed. It's fine to have people who make the headlines, but what the world needs most is all of us doing our part in ordinary ways, and when we do, we are blessed, made content, fulfilled at the deepest level of our being.