

Beati

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown
Washington, D.C.
November 1, 2020 / All Saints' Day

by Andrew A. Kryzak

Matthew 5:1-12

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew, which we have just heard, is commonly known as the *Beatitudes*. In the Latin version of the Bible, each of these blessings begins with the word *beati*, which means “happy” or “rich” or indeed “blessed.” Hence we get the *Beatitudes*, this series of our Lord’s proclamations of what it is that makes a person happy or rich or blessed.

All of this is background, so that we might be on the same page and I can ask you a question: Do you find the Beatitudes annoying? Even just a little bit?

I won’t embarrass you by asking for a show of hands, or for you to confess to whomever is sitting near you. But if you do find that all of this gets under your skin a bit, you are not alone. This is 21st-century America after all! Multimillion-dollar wellness and lifestyle businesses are built every day with the express purpose of avoiding and in fact eliminating every one of the qualities on Jesus’ list. Are you poor in spirit? Find your inner peace and wholeness. Are you meek? Center yourself and cultivate inner strength through these three easy steps! Reviled and persecuted? “We operate from a place of curiosity and nonjudgment, and we start hard conversations, crack open taboos, and look for connection and resonance everywhere we can find it.”¹ All this, and more, for just \$35/ session.

And yet, as Christians, here we are, face to face with this series of eight pronouncements by our Lord Jesus Christ, eight qualities which to us are supposed to define for us the good life. On the one hand, the Beatitudes. On the other, everything else and even common sense. What gives?

You will by now have realized that today is All Saints’ Day, when we in the church remember all those who have gone before us. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews calls the saints that great “cloud of witnesses;” they were the leading lights in their generations, and their examples illuminate the way of faith for those of us who follow.² You will of course know that yesterday was Halloween, which is a contraction of All Hallows’ Eve. In old English, the word *hallow* was used as a noun, referring to a saint or a holy person. It’s not hard to see how you get there from

¹ “What’s goop?: The Story Behind the Brand,” goop, accessed October 29, 2020, <https://goop.com/whats-goop/>.

² Hebrews 12:1.

the verb form of the same word. If *to hallow* is to set apart, to honor as holy, to consecrate, then it makes good sense that a *hallow* is a person set apart in the same way.

Perhaps this is an odd year to be thinking about the saints. It is obvious that we live in a decidedly anti-heroic moment. Many of our most beloved historical figures are having their dirty laundry aired and their legacies called into question. Many of us might find that rather distasteful, even as we acknowledge its inevitability. In the information age, we probably know too much about everybody for anybody's reputation to emerge unscathed.

But we should not confuse our historical heroes with the saints.

One of the theological principles I most like to point out is that the Christian life is marked not chiefly by its outcomes, but by its inputs; it is not about the quantity of achievement, but about the content of character. Christian virtue is anterior to Christian living, which it both precedes and enables.

We can see this in the way we venerate the saints, many of whom were of little worldly account, and for many more of whom gruesome death was their most important worldly achievement. We do not remember that any of them was perfect, because their biographies tell us that they were *not* perfect. What we remember is their faithfulness and their Christian virtue, especially under conditions of duress. We remember St Thomas Becket not because he was a lawyer and ecclesiastical administrator and archbishop of skill and accomplishment, but because he defended the church against the faithlessness of Henry II. We remember St Francis' humility and gentleness much more than his founding of a series of religious orders. We remember St Martin of Tours for cutting his soldier's cloak in half, to give to a beggar clothed only in rags.

Our historical heroes are remembered for their accomplishments, but the saints are remembered for the extent to which they were meek, hungry for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers, especially under the most extraordinary conditions of revilement and persecution.

When I was in divinity school, we were visited by a rather old and distinguished Episcopal gentleman, who spoke to us about the work of the clergy. He did this with the demeanor of a person speaking to a child who tends not to listen. But one of the things he said, which has stuck with me ever since, was this: "A good Christian is not the same thing as a good church volunteer."³

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³ Byron Rushing, of St. John St. James, Roxbury, Mass.

This was not to poo-poo the ministries of the parish church, but to remind clergy that the church is not a closed system. Our responsibility is not to run an activities center for Christians, but to create apostles for Jesus Christ. And because an *apostle* is, from the Greek, a person who is *sent forth*, we may be reminded that the field of Christian endeavor extends far beyond the doors of this church into each and every place that we conduct our lives. We come into this building to pray, to study, to take care of one another not as an end in itself but so that we can be strengthened for the mission field, which is, as the hymn reminds us, “in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea.”⁴

As I continue on through the life of faith, I must admit that I am finding the Beatitudes less and less annoying. In fact, they have become something of a comfort. They are a reminder, to me at least, that what our Lord asks of me – that what he asks of all of us – is not moral perfection, but moral courage, and that he has sent his Holy Spirit to empower each and every one of us to be brave in the face of what may seem to be insurmountable challenges. Anger. Fear. Resentment. Polarization. Scorn. Cynicism.

This is why the mark of a Christian is not that he’s unafraid; a Christian might very well be afraid, but he does the right thing anyway. It takes considerable moral courage to go to your company, or your club, or your client, or your brother and say, “I think you’re doing it wrong. Have you thought of making this change?” It’s dangerous to risk your livelihood or your social or professional reputation, all to stand for righteousness. But as St Paul reminds us, we will each stand before the judgment seat of God.⁵ So in the day of decision, when you are asked to decide if you will obey God or follow the crowd, what will YOU do, what will you offer to God? By God’s grace, will you risk your life, your fortune, and your sacred honor in Jesus’ name?⁶

Before anything else, a Christian is a person whose character and posture toward the world is definitively marked by meekness, thirst for righteousness, mercy, peaceableness.⁷ This all may sound rather dull, but as the rector reminded us in his sermon a few weeks ago, the life of service to God is one of perfect freedom. And that freedom – which the Greeks called *apatheia*, a state of being unburdened – gives us the ability to perceive truth and beauty. It gives us the ability to discern the will of God. It gives us the stamina with God’s help to do what is hard, and it gives us humility. These are the marks of a person who is alive in Christ, and they are more joyful and precious than anything for sale for just \$35/ session.

⁴ Lesbia Scott, “I sing a song of the saints of God,” stanza 3.

⁵ Romans 14:10

⁶ See II Samuel 12:14 as well.

⁷ Martin Luther King knew this, which is why in “A Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” he remarked, “Mindful of the difficulties involved [in nonviolent civil disobedience], we decided to undertake a process of self purification.” April 16, 1963.

The saints whom we honor today... they were not perfect, neither the ancients nor the moderns. But I must say that their perseverance under imperfect conditions is a comfort. If they could do it, then maybe there's a life of faithful service out there for a sinner like me.

If they could do it, then we can do it as well. And in all our doings in this life, as we walk the way of the Cross, striving for holiness and godliness, we look forward to that day when Jesus Christ will address all the saints, living and dead, and we shall each hear his voice, saying, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

AMEN.