

The Festival of All Saints
5 November, Anno Domini 2023
St. Matthew 5:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved saints of God,

You have come to know through Holy Scriptures that not everything is always as it seems. We are constantly having to adjust our understanding of the world and our own situation through the lens of God's Word. We are not to judge what we see simply at face value or even by our personal experience. The Festival of All Saints is a wonderful reminder of that great and important truth.

I have no doubt that most if not all of you have struggled at one time or another to believe that you are forgiven, that you are a Christian. After all, you have lashed out in anger, you have coveted the lives and things of others, you have spoken unkind and untrue things about someone. And is God's Word the hub around which your daily life revolves? I don't mean simply giving it a thought, but actually devoting some portion of the day to prayer and study of the Bible. Besides these things, you have to face your suffering. Your body is sick, perhaps even approaching death. By worldly measures you aren't successful or strong. And the world finds you to be a fool because you actually believe that God created the world in six days by speaking or that a man name Jesus Christ two thousand years ago was born of a young virgin, performed miracles, and rose from the dead. Perhaps your mind is heavy with depression or anxiety. Perhaps Satan is pressing a full attack against you, trying to draw you down into the abyss of despair. Don't such things indicate that my faith is weak or that I'm not a Christian at all?

What you see in yourself probably doesn't give you much encouragement. What you are experiencing probably causes you to wonder if you are actually forgiven or if God actually loves you. It may even be so difficult for you right now that you may wonder if God has become your enemy, if God hates you and has abandoned you.

But we only think such things because we are duped by our reason, our emotions, our eyes, and our senses. We see only the surface and forget what reality is. We stop giving priority to the word and promises of God and instead are ruled by our circumstances and how we feel. We begin to believe the world's foolish notion of

what it is to be blessed, the purpose of believing in God, and how God works in the midst of this dark and sin-sick world.

Our default position is to associate wealth and possessions with being blessed. Consequently, if you don't have those things then you must not be blessed. This is what lies at the heart of what is referred to as the prosperity Gospel - the idea that God blesses you by giving you worldly things and that that is the whole purpose of being a Christian. If you don't have these things it is because you are doing something wrong and holding back God's blessings. Or, worse, God's blessings aren't for you. It is what lurks behind the assumption that megachurches with massive budgets are blessed and small churches struggling to pay the bills are not.

And this is the Gospel our flesh wants. We want believing in God to mean that our lives are better, more fulfilling, and free of any serious suffering. Under the spell of this false teaching we chafe under suffering and act as though suffering is bad or a sign that God doesn't love us. Our resentment of weakness and suffering betray the reality that we want nothing more from God than more of those things that moth and rust destroy and thieves are able to break in and steal. When we measure blessedness at all in terms of earthly wealth or success or comfort we declare that we are not interested in the righteousness of God's kingdom and that we think the greatest thing about heaven will be the streets that are paved with gold.

The blessed ones of which Jesus speaks, those who St. John sees around the throne in white robes are those "coming out of the great tribulation". The life of the blessed in this world is not one of glory and success and abundance. It is a life of self-denial, a life of suffering the mockery and hatred of the world and the never-ending assaults of the devil. It is a life of denying the flesh what it wants and being satisfied with your daily bread. It is a life of sacrifice and humility. It is a life of quiet devotion to the things of God and teaching the faith to your family. It is a life that receives the discipline and chastisements of God confident that God will fulfill His promises and is truly working good for us. It is a life that the worldly-minded can't fathom and even despise. It is a life of tribulation because it would rather endure every ounce of the world's hatred in this life than to deny the truth of God's Word and suffer God's wrath for all eternity.

But you have this assurance, children of God, the life that you live now by faith in Christ, the life that seems so insignificant, the life that looks anything but blessed, the life that is often filled with great tribulation and affliction, that life is the blessed life. Christ has told you. The life of faith is a life that is hated by this world, by the devil, and even by your own flesh. They will fight you and punish

you and stop at nothing to turn you away from Christ. The world will seethe and rage and call you all kinds of names, persecute you, make your life miserable, act in all kinds of unjust ways, and falsely accuse you of all manner of evil things. They did the same to your Lord in their bitter hatred of Him. The devil will stir up all kinds of misery and torment against you. Your flesh will seek to betray you and long for whatever is easiest, most comfortable, and most pleasurable.

Dear Christian, do not listen to them or imagine that what they would seek to do to you supersedes God's promises to you. Your blessedness lays hidden, veiled from your eyes and the world's. Your treasure is a promise that has not yet reached its total fulfillment. You ARE God's children. The promises of your Baptism tell you that - not the size of your bank account or the number on your blood pressure cuff. Your trials and afflictions are not sent by God in His anger to torment you, but to refine you as gold can only be refined in the searing heat. We cannot see or understand all that God in His wisdom and mercy are doing, but we can be sure that He is working good for us even from the most terrible things the devil and the world throw at us. Turn your eyes again to the cross of your Savior wherein from the greatest act of evil the world has ever seen, the crucifixion of the Lord of Life, God worked the salvation of the world. You are blessed because you have been rescued from eternal judgment and been adopted through water into the family of God. You ARE sons of the Most High God because He Himself has declared it to be so.

And though you endure great tribulation here in this world, John's vision of the countless throngs of heaven awaits you. Your suffering will have its end at the proper time. You will leave this great tribulation and, with robes washed white in the crimson Blood of the Lamb, you will stand with joy before the throne of God. The blessedness which is veiled now will be revealed in all its glory. Nothing will be hidden. There will be no more hope or faith because everything will finally be yours. You will be like Christ, pure as He is pure, because your hope now is in Him and only in Him, because His Word is your chief joy and only treasure. This is the promise granted to all who cling to Him by faith now in this valley of the shadow of death, to all who endure and live by His promises, contrary to what you see and feel and experience now on this earth. Here the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, stirring up every imaginable evil against God's children to devour them - wicked rulers, false teachers, disease, war, and famine. But the devil's roarings are, in fact, little more than the sad and pathetic cries of one who has been utterly defeated and had to watch in terror as the Lion of Judah marched in triumph through hell as the great conqueror of sin and death and rose again from the dead. Christ sits on the throne now. He is God. He is ruling over everything in heaven

and on earth. Everything, and I mean literally everything, must serve His good and gracious will, even the devil's mad ravings. And that will is your salvation. He causes His saving Word to be proclaimed. He opens the font to receive sinners and save them. He sets forth the food of His Body and Blood to strengthen His children that you might be strengthened for the remainder of your time of sojourning. In these and by these you are blessed.

Do not lose heart. Do not be dismayed by the evil that you see and experience. It doesn't change the promises that God has made to you. Your heavenly Father will deliver you. Whatever He allows to befall you, He will give you strength to endure. You are His dear child. And you have the promise that all your sufferings will lead to an eternal and glorious end, your enemies will lie vanquished at your feet, and you will join the countless host around the throne of God in everlasting blessedness and joy.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.