

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Called to Be Saints

Colossians 1:24-2:5

If I were to get up here on Sunday morning and greet you by saying, "Good morning saints," you might be a little surprised and puzzled. First of all, you may be thinking, he doesn't usually call us that. And secondly, when he says "saints," is he referring to all of us, or to just a select few within the congregation who have excelled in holiness? Who are these "saints" he's addressing?

We tend to think of saints as believers who are in a category of their own. They seem to be at a different level of spiritual discipline and godliness. The presence of Christ in their lives, and their progress in becoming like him, make saints stand out from most of us who are striving to follow Jesus each day. At least that's the way we often perceive them.

But in reality, being a saint is something to which all of us in the church are called. In this broader sense, sainthood is about growing into Christian maturity. Recall that we just spent the last month in a series of sermons on that very subject. My structure for that series of messages was shaped a lot by a book I mentioned early on, by Gordon T. Smith, titled *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*. Based on what he sees as the essence of the Christian life, union with Christ, Smith describes four expressions or marks of holiness. Since today's sermon is sort of an extension of that series, let's review these four characteristics. Smith summarizes them this way:

- Wisdom: a mature Christian has a heart and mind informed by the truth, largely through the witness of the Scriptures.
- Good work: a mature Christian has clarity about his or her calling—with the courage and humility and capacity to fulfill this vocation.
- Ability to love others: a mature Christian knows how to love others in Christ as Christ has loved us.
- Joy: a mature Christian lives with a deep and resilient joy, even in the midst of a fragmented world.¹

Wisdom, vocation, love, and joy. These are traits of a Christian saint, in the broad sense, which means, as I indicated, that I'm standing here this morning looking out at a gathering of saints. Sinners, yes, but sinners redeemed by Christ, and set on the path of holiness. As the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard put it, "God creates out of *nothing*. Wonderful, you say. Yes, to be sure, but He does what is still more wonderful: He makes saints out of sinners."²

The church is the community of faith where we mature the saints. That takes time. One person has observed, "The church should be a community of dates instead of pumpkins. Pumpkins you can harvest in six months. Dates have to be planted and tended by people who will not live to harvest them. Dates are for future generations."³

So maturing the saints is a long-term project. Paul knew this in his experience with his churches. In today's text from Colossians, he's laboring hard to keep this community of believers focused on what Christ has already achieved by his death and resurrection.

Apparently there are some false teachers in the congregation whose message turns the gospel into a body of secret knowledge designed primarily for the spiritual elite, who aim to make progress through heavenly revelations and mystical experiences. But Paul counters this false teaching by reminding the Colossians that the gospel isn't some hidden mystery transmitted to just a select few. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has fully revealed his agenda to save, reconciling us to himself and to one another. This is good news for everyone, Jews and Gentiles. It means that through the cross, racial and ethnic barriers have been overcome, and that God's resurrecting, life-giving power has been unleashed in the world to restore his glory in humankind and in the cosmos. And this new humankind is being constituted as sinners, one by one, respond to the call to be reconciled to God.

But coming to faith in Christ is just the beginning. These "saints" or "holy ones," as Paul regularly refers to them in this letter, are called to make progress in holiness. Paul says, "We proclaim him [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (1:28). The Greek term translated there as "perfect" means "mature." It's not primarily a kind of perfectionism that comes from outworking other believers or trying to impress God, but a completeness or wholeness of life that comes from being joined to Christ by faith and having his power at work in you, making you more like him.

Paul knows this power, this divine energy, firsthand. It's what sustains him in his ministry to the Colossians. In the midst of all the human effort and the toll it takes, Paul knows that the power of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, is what will get believers from where they are to where God intends them to be, completion in Christlikeness, so that on the day of judgement, they can stand before the Lord blameless and without fault.

That's God's goal and purpose for us in Christ. When we ultimately stand before the Lord, we'll be judged on how much the righteousness of Christ has been formed in our own lives. It won't be about your own efforts, your own works, your own achievements. It will be about what Christ accomplished for you, and whether his life has taken shape in your life. It will be about whether you're joined to Christ by faith, and what kind of person you've become.

The story is told about two brothers who terrorized a small town for decades. According to one person:

They were unfaithful to their wives, abusive to their children, and dishonest in business. The younger brother died unexpectedly. The surviving brother went to the pastor of the local church. "I'd like you to conduct my brother's funeral," he said, "but it's important to me that during the service, you tell everyone my brother was a saint."

"But he was far from that," the minister countered. The wealthy brother pulled out his checkbook. "Reverend, I'm prepared to give \$100,000 to your church. All I'm asking is that you publicly state that my brother was a saint." On the day of the funeral, the pastor began his eulogy this way. "Everyone here knows that the deceased was a wicked man, a womanizer, and a drunk. He terrorized his employees and cheated on his taxes." Then he paused. "But as evil and sinful as this man was, compared to his older brother, he was a saint!"⁴

In the end, your sainthood, your holiness, won't be assessed based on how your life looks compared to someone else's, but on the holiness of Christ. His holiness and purity isn't something you attain by your own efforts. It's something you receive by faith, and grow into as you move through life. Paul reminds the Colossians, and us, that God has already done what's necessary to give us access to heaven and a share in the everlasting life of

God's people. But as we live by faith, we're called to mature in this heavenly holiness. We're meant to make progress in sainthood.

This doesn't happen by detaching ourselves from the ordinariness of daily life. The events, experiences, relationships, opportunities, tasks, and hardships of each day are the very context where we nurture and develop holiness. We sometimes misperceive saintliness as a matter of separating or removing oneself from the routines and rhythms of life, in order to cultivate spiritual knowledge and ethical purity. But in reality, saintliness takes us into, not out of, the world.

During World War II, Britain faced a critical shortage of silver for its war industries. When he was informed of the crisis, Prime Minister Winston Churchill asked if there were any possible sources of silver, however remote. He received word that the churches, cathedrals, and abbeys held beautiful, sterling silver statues of the saints. From Churchill came the now-famous reply, "Well, it's time to put the saints into circulation!" And so they did.⁵

That's what we're called and commissioned to be. Christian living, day in and day out, is a matter of being saints in circulation, involved in the lives of others, engaged with the issues of the day, responsive to the needs of our communities, and in touch with the world's sufferings and sorrows. Remember that in Christ, we have both access to the world to come and power for living distinctively and faithfully in the concrete realities of this present world.

And as we do so, we rely upon God's grace, which is what makes saintliness possible in the first place. That's what we'll remember in a few moments as we eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord's table. Just before today's text, Paul writes, "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (1:22-23a). So being a saint isn't just a moment. It's a lifelong process of persevering in the grace that gets you from faith in Christ to finality in Christ, the fullness of holiness.

For now, our holiness is supposed to point beyond us to the holiness of God. Earlier in Colossians, Paul writes that we're to be "giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:12-14). Saints inhabiting the kingdom of light. It's easy to lose sight of who we as the church are called and created to be. Saints. Holy ones. People of light.

Duke Chapel in Durham, North Carolina has stained glass windows that depict every major scene in the Bible and contain an estimated 800 to 900 figures. One day, when the sun was shining brightly through the stained glass, a member of the staff of Duke Divinity School brought his son to the chapel. "Those windows show pictures of the saints," he told his son. "Do you know who the saints are?" The little boy, staring at the light as it blazed through the windows, said, "Yes, the saints are the ones the sun shines through." May the light and holiness of Christ shine through us.

¹ Gordon T. Smith. *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014. Kindle Edition.

² Soren Kierkegaard's Journals, translation by Alexander Dru. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, no. 14.

³ George Chauncey, *Leadership*, Vol. 2, No. 4.

⁴ Greg Asimakoupoulos, *Leadership*, Vol. 16, no. 4.

⁵ John S. Barnett, "Saints in Circulation." *Discipleship Journal* (March/April 1986).