

Ephesians 2:1-10 + By Grace, We Are Saints + Series: What Does This Mean?
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + Festival of All Saints + 5 November 2017

Ever receive one of those pieces of advice that just stick with you? I mean a piece of advice that becomes an axiom for your life, a truth that you live by. Not all advice is good, but at some point in your life, someone might give you advice that impacts what you do and who you become going forward, advice that becomes a guiding principle for your life.

One time back in grade school, my father came to pick us up from school. While we were waiting, we talked about all kinds of things. Somewhere in that conversation, my dad shared with me a piece of advice that has stuck with me ever since. “Remember who you are.”

Now I could’ve been a smart-aleck and said, “Of course, I remember who I am! I’m Jeremiah Gumm,” but that advice meant something more. As I grew up, I wasn’t just Jeremiah Gumm, son of Pastor Alan and Carolyn Gumm. I was also a Christian, a child of God through the waters of Holy Baptism and made holy with the blood of Christ. My father hoped that advice would stick with me and help me in the future. Looking back, I can say that it did and still does, though I haven’t always remembered it like my father hoped.

This morning we’re celebrating a church festival that has much to do with that fatherly advice I received years ago. You might be wondering why we’re celebrating “All Saints.” What exactly are we celebrating? Is it some kind of hero worship of those believers of the past who were holier than the average Christian? Is this a festival filled with sad remembrance for fellow believers now in heaven? Or is All Saints about remembering who we are and why?

What is a “saint”? If we were to dig into what Scripture says about “saints,” we would see that “saints” are “people made holy by God.” The letter writers of the New Testament—Paul, Peter, John—often referred to their readers as “saints,” as people whom God had made holy. They weren’t writing to super-Christians. They were writing to people like us wrestling with the reality of sin in their lives, but who were made holy because of God’s undeserved love or “grace” in Jesus. All Saints is really about remembering and celebrating who we and others are because of God’s grace.

Yet before we can celebrate who we are, we need to look back and remember what we were. You look back and what do you see? You see someone who is both dead, yet also enslaved to the cravings of a horrible tyrant. You see someone who is essentially one of the “walking dead,” a spiritual zombie—dead, blind, and hostile to God.

Now you might think to yourself, “That couldn’t possibly be me. There’s no way! I’ve never been a slave, and I’m very much alive.” Paul begs to differ. **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...”** By nature, you were **“dead”** to the holy God. Why? God defined how holy you had to be—love him with every fiber of your being and love your neighbor perfectly or face his holy condemnation. Yet you willfully and completely crossed that line of God’s holy will into disobedience.

...But when did you willfully disobey God’s holy will? Paul explains, **“You followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”** By nature, we prefer the ever-changing **“ways of this world.”** Like shifting sands, our world never stays in one place. It’s always focused on gratifying whatever selfish desire or sinful lust happens to be popular. Satan, then, tries to use those **“ways of this world”** to separate us from our God.

If what we’ve seen isn’t repulsive enough, it gets worse. **“All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”** Not a single one of us can ever say, “I’ve never gratified the cravings or desires or thoughts of my sinful nature.” Whether you’re a lifelong Christian or a recent convert, inside of you is a slave driver who wants you to gratify its every desire and thought. That sinful nature betrays you so often that in God’s sight, you are an **“object of wrath.”** By nature, none of us is a saint. We are all children of wrath.

We dare never forget what we were by nature, because if we do, we will return to those ways because they come naturally to us. At the same time, what good can we possibly present to the holy God? There’s not even a shred of good in any of us! Every one of us deserves God’s eternal wrath. We’ve all earned it, and we have no reason to put any hope in ourselves.

...But remember what we’re celebrating today! It’s the Festival of All **Saints**. Yes, we remember what we were by nature, but we celebrate what we are in Christ! By nature, we were objects of wrath, **“but because of his**

great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...”

Why does God’s grace matter so much? Grace is God’s ***“great love for us.”*** There was nothing lovable about any of us—not the cutest baby, not the kindest adult. We should’ve been rejected, abandoned, and left for dead because of sin, yet God, who is abundantly rich in mercy, still loved you and me. Because of that completely undeserved love, God put his every effort into making you alive when you were dead, free when you were a slave, and a child of God when you were a child of wrath. It’s no wonder Paul cries out, ***“It is by grace you have been saved!”***

God put his every effort into making you one of his holy saints! By grace, he sent his one and only Son to be obedient because you were disobedient, to perfectly follow God’s holy will because you willfully followed your sinful nature. From the moment of his conception to his final breath on the cross, Jesus was God’s perfect love—his grace—embodied in human flesh like yours.

Ultimately, Jesus embodied God’s grace for you when he suffered death on the cross, not in payment for his own sin, but as the just payment for yours. His perfect obedience became your perfect obedience. His innocent death became your holiness, and his life and resurrection became your eternal life.

Now when God looks at you, he sees Jesus’ perfect obedience. He sees the righteousness Jesus earned for you on the cross, and he sees Jesus’ victory over death for you. Because of that, God sees you no longer as a child of wrath, but as his holy child possessing heaven already. ***“And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”***

You might wonder how God can possibly show ***“the incomparable riches of his grace”*** through you, but consider how much effort he’s put into expressing ***“his kindness to you in Christ Jesus.”*** Consider how he guided your life to bring you into contact with his grace, whether by your parents bringing you to the baptismal font or by the good news of his grace shared by a pastor, a family member, or a friend. Consider how he has planted and nurtured your faith up to today. Celebrate who you are in Christ—one of God’s holy saints!

In fact, as one of God’s holy saints, you already possess heaven even as you live in this sinful world. There’s nothing you have to do to earn it. It’s yours purely because of God’s undeserved love embodied in Christ. ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”***

When God brought you into contact with the good news of his grace, his Holy Spirit planted faith in your heart—not some spark of goodness or the urge to make a decision for Jesus, but faith in Jesus through which God gives you all the blessings of his love. There’s no way you or I can claim any credit for our salvation, even in the slightest. By God’s grace, we are saints!

You’ve been made alive with Christ through faith, so now God enables you to serve him. ***“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*** You know what that means? That means when you wake up in the morning, your loving God has a day full of opportunities for you to ***“do good works,”*** not to earn his favor, but to serve your neighbor as God’s hand of blessing to them.

That means if you’re married or in a relationship, God prepares opportunities to bless your spouse or significant other through you with his self-sacrificing love. If you’re a parent, God prepares opportunities to bless your children through you with his kindness. If you’re an employee, God prepares opportunities to bless your customers or your employer through your faithful service. If you’re a student, God prepares opportunities to bless your teacher or those who will benefit from your education as you faithfully do your assignments and pay attention. There’s plenty more. God fills your every day with opportunities to be a blessing to your neighbor and then his grace enables you to willingly carry them out.

As you remember what you were by nature and celebrate what you are in Christ, don’t forget to also look ahead to what you will be. On this festival, our God through his Word lifts our eyes heavenward and reminds us of those believers made holy in the blood of Christ who now enjoy eternal rest with our Savior. Even as we look towards heaven, we again only see God’s grace.

Earlier in Revelation 7, the Apostle John gave us a glimpse of the glorious victory celebration that awaits us in heaven someday. All the saints, that is, all believers of all time everywhere—including believers you know and

love, and all the hosts of heaven gather around the throne of the Lamb of God and sing his eternal praises. That's where we will be someday, and what do you see?

You see saints, believers like us, set free for all eternity. You see saints, believers like us, free of guilt because we've been washed clean with the blood of the Lamb. You see saints, believers like us, free of sin and able to stand without fear before the throne of the holy God because we've been made holy by Christ. You see saints, believers like us, free of the needs of this life—free of hunger, thirst, pain, fear, grief, and sorrow. You see what we will be someday because by the grace of our loving God, we are saints.

On this day and always, we do not forget what we were by nature—dead, foolish children of wrath. On this day and always, we celebrate what we are in Christ—saints made holy by the grace of God. On this day and always, we look ahead to what we will be in heaven—saints set free from sin, Satan, and death. On this day and always, dear saints, remember who you are! Amen.