

Saints and Other Failures

(This message is part of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")

Romans 8:12-17

In honor of All Saints' Day...

This holiday dates back to the 7th century as a celebration of all saints, known and unknown, so I thought we'd talk about saints for a moment.

Over the centuries saints have been seen as helpers or assistants in the Christian life of average believers. They were seen as close to God because of any miracles they might have done, but still human and worthy of following as examples.

The requirements for becoming a saint were exemplary lives and the performing of miracles. The Catholic Church takes nominations, then sends a commission out to research the life of the candidate. The commission builds a case for sainthood and presents it to the Vatican. That's where the fun begins.

The last stage is a trial, where the commission presents its case, and someone called a promotor justitiae argues the other side. We know that person better as the Devil's Advocate. The Devil's Advocate (or, the DA) tries to oppose every aspect of the case for sainthood by every lawful tactic. If the candidate survives, then eventually they're canonized as a saint.

Catholic or not, most of us are aware of the idea of a patron saint. That's a saint who has some historical connection with a group or type of person.

There are patron saints for actors, animals and archers. For cab drivers, clothworkers and cooks. For fathers, firefighters and fishermen. For lawyers and leatherworkers and lovers.

There are patron saints for headache sufferers, heart patients, and those who suffer from intestinal ailments (Erasmus, a 3rd century Italian bishop, who earned

the honor because of the gruesome way he was martyred.).

Gabriel, the angel with the loud horn, is the patron saint of broadcasters.

Benedict is the patron saint of speleologists, which I had to look up. Speleologists are people who study caves—I'm not sure why they need their own saint... You won't get this kind of information anywhere else.

Joseph of Copertino was said to rise up off the ground and even fly when the Spirit moved him, so now he's the patron saint of astronauts.

Matthew, who was a tax collector before becoming one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, is the patron saint of bankers and accountants.

Every one of these women and men became saints because they had demonstrated some extreme level of faithfulness. They'd accomplished some great task, or done some great miracle. They came to represent the ideal for what we should do and how we should live.

But at some point each one of these saints had to earn their way into sainthood. They had to meet some standard and be judged by their brothers and sisters to see if they were worthy.

I hope you can see how different that is from what we've been learning in Paul's letter to the Romans. The whole point of this for Paul—the thing that drove the growth of the Christian faith and even inspired the Reformation 1500 years later—the point of the gospel is that we don't have to earn it at all.

Forgiveness for our sins, and restoration to life in the presence of God—all of that is a free gift that we receive when we come before Christ in faith.

12Therefore, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. 13For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.

And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." 16The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Just to recap the theme of our journey through Romans:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

The substance of Paul's case is the relationship we were made to have with God, and the way that relationship is complicated by sin.

If you trace the history of the human relationship to God you see that God has always provided a way for us to come back to him—that's the point of the Old Testament Law.

Paul talks about the difference between life in the flesh and life led by the Spirit. One writer describes it like this:

"Life pursued according to the flesh is the life influenced by rebellion and idolatry, in which the entire perspective of the person is turned on him- or herself, and the person becomes the center of all values.

Life in the Spirit, on the other hand, is life set free from bondage to self and sin...It is life in bondage to God, which freely acknowledges his lordship through Jesus Christ. The power of Christ's lordship has broken the enslaving power of self-worship and sin, and set the person free to enjoy a new relationship with God—that new relationship is as a child—a son or daughter—rather than a rebel."

I love the part of our text that talks about being God's children—being made

heirs—being made to feel part of the family. It's still more than I can comprehend that God calls us into a relationship with him where we can be close to him—where we can rest in his presence—where we can call out to him, Abba, Father.

The real translation of Abba is 'Daddy', a term of closeness and affection and safety.

What does it mean to be welcomed into God's family?

"To be led by God's Spirit means to have changed our future from life to death, to have changed our relationship to God from rebellion to obedience, and to have changed our status from enemy to beloved child."

Another way of looking at this, and in honor of All Saints' Day, is that we're all saints now, just by coming to Christ in faith.

We're all saints now, not by anything we've done to earn it, but through the grace of God only.

That's the gospel of Jesus Christ—that's the essence of the Christian faith.

That's what we remember as we come to the Table in Communion.

Christ's sacrifice on the cross means that we're forgiven, that we're welcomed into God's family with full inheritance privileges, and that wherever we are or wherever we go, we have a home where we're loved and where we belong.

Our 'hymn out of season' today is a usually sung on Good Friday, as we reflect on the pain and suffering of Christ's sacrifice for us. We sing it now as a way of preparing our hearts to celebrate Communion today.

Please stand and let's sing together: 'O Sacred Head, Now Wounded'