

Series: Our Christian Identity

Sermon 4 (2/28/2016)

### I Am a Saint

As we saw last week, the center of our identity is our union with Christ. Everything else about our identity, in one way or another, flows out of that central reality. We're going to try to keep everything else in the series connected to that, and today we are looking at one of those truths about us, one of the features of our identity: we are *saints*. That sounds a little arrogant! We don't talk like that normally; if we do, it is usually in a limited way, perhaps to describe someone who has a remarkable degree of good character traits, is unusually loving or self-sacrificing, consistent, a good testimony, etc.

In the Roman Catholic church, there is a formal way of describing people as saints. I got a little curious about how that process, called "canonization," worked, and actually there are a lot of steps before that—including a step called "beatification." I'd like to read to you something that summarizes how that works, in Catholic theology: "The process of documenting the life and virtues of a holy man or woman cannot begin until five years after death. This waiting period ensures that the person has an enduring reputation for sanctity among the faithful. [The five-year waiting period] can be waived by the Supreme Pontiff and has happened on two occasions. Pope John Paul III waived three years of the waiting period in the case of Mother Theresa, and Pope Benedict XVI waived all five years in the case of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II." So, they got off easy, but in most cases, you'll have to wait at least five years before the process begins. "After the five years have concluded (or earlier if all or some of the waiting period is waived), the bishop of the diocese in which the individual died can petition the Holy See to allow the initialization of a 'cause for beatification and canonization.'" If no objection is raised, the bishop is informed and the process can go on. The individual can then be formally called a "servant of God." There is then a tribunal, a first phase, during which the person's public and private writings are collected and examined; this can take many years and concludes with the tribunal's decision about whether the individual's writings and character meet the criteria for sainthood. Next is the "congregation for the causes of the saints." The "acta" resulting from the research phase is given to a "relator," appointed to represent the cause. Working with a theological commission established by the congregation, the relator ensures that the presentation of the individual's virtues is properly prepared. When it is finished, the commission votes affirmatively or negatively. This recommendation is then passed to the cardinal, archbishop, and bishop members of the congregation, who vote on whether the cause lives or dies. If the vote is affirmative, a "decree of heroic virtues" is sent to the Pope, whose judgment is final.

So, if you make it through all of those hoops, you go from being called a "servant of the Lord" to being called "venerable." How do you go on from there? Well, there has to be proof that a miracle was performed by way of praying to you in heaven. The next phase is an investigation of any miracle that was claimed to have been experienced. First, it must be proven that it was actually a miracle, beyond nature. Second, that you were the one being prayed to. It could be a little confusing if Mary or Joseph was also being prayed to about the miracle. If that is established, and if the Pope approves, then at that point you are beatified, and you can now be called "blessed." People in that category may receive public veneration at the local or regional level, but it is not an official declaration. Veneration really is a kind of worship, including prayers. But how do you get to the next level and actually be called a saint? The key is a *second* miracle, clearly supernatural and attributed to your power. If that is ultimately approved, the

Pope may decide to canonize you and you will be called a “saint.” “By the rite of canonization, the Supreme Pontiff, by an act which is protected from error by the Holy Spirit, elevates a person to the level of universal veneration of the Church. By canonization the Pope does not make a person a saint; rather, he declares that the person is with God and is an example of following Christ, worthy of imitation by the faithful. A mass, divine office, and other acts of veneration may now be offered to the individual throughout the Universal Church.”

In addition to that being a complicated process, in addition to it being beyond the reach of most of us because of the whole “miracle” thing, it is entirely contrary to everything the Bible teaches about being a saint! It has nothing to do with the way the Bible uses this kind of language. Maybe because Bible-believing, Christian people have reacted against these false practices of calling people saints, we tend to avoid, almost altogether, this language. But, in fact, “saint” in the Bible is a synonym for words like Christian, disciple, believer. Saint is in the same category. Turn to Acts 9. We’ll be looking at a lot of passages today, but in Acts 9 we see the start of the regular practice of calling believers saints. In Acts 9:13, 32, and 41, you can see that it is a general way of describing believers. We can see the same in Romans 1:7, 8:27, and 12:13. It’s a little hard to square that last verse with Roman Catholic teaching, if saints are people who are dead! How can you contribute to their needs and show them hospitality?

Jump ahead to Romans 15:25-26 and 31: Paul describes Christian people in Rome and Jerusalem as saints. I Corinthians 1:2 shows that “saints” describes everyone who has put their trust in the Lord. The label “saints” applies to them no matter where they live. In II Corinthians 1:1, writing to the same church, Paul uses the same language. In Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, and many other passages, we can see that saint is just one of several labels used in the New Testament for all Christians generally.

What is it that Paul and these other writers are communicating with this language, which can sound strange to us? Do you feel like a saint? Have you acted like a saint this past week? If the answer is “not entirely,” how can it be appropriate to still call you a saint? We hear a lot about the idea of *progressive sanctification*—that we are becoming more holy, more saintly. That is a truth that the New Testament develops, but in reality, the majority of the times the Bible uses the words meaning saint or holy one, it’s not talking about progressive sanctification. That is communicated by other terms and description. The terms saint, holy, holiness, and sanctify most of the time are actually talking about something else: *positional sanctification*, or *definitive sanctification*. That’s the amazing truth that before God, in an important sense, believers are already saints. What’s going on—how does that work? We’ll consider three questions: what, how, and so what? What difference does it make?

First, the “what”: just defining our terms. In English, when we use a word like saint or sanctify, and also a term like holy or holiness, those terms come from different word roots. In the Hebrew Bible, however, all of those terms come from the same word root. They are all related terms. In the Greek New Testament, the same is true; they all reflect the same root in that language. If you look at a dictionary or lexicon to define the terms, they are described in terms of *separateness*. Holiness, sanctification have to do with being separate or set apart. But that idea is still incomplete. Separateness can have a negative connotation, as we think about primarily being set apart from sin. In other words, holiness means that we don’t do sin; we are separate from what is immoral or evil. Again, that is part of it, but we need to also ask what we are separated *unto*—not just what we are separated *from*. The Bible doesn’t teach that God just pulled us out of a sinful life and that’s the end of it. He pulled us out unto something else, and

that positive part is actually more important. It's what motivates us to try, by God's grace, to stay away from sin.

To get at this, we need to understand the holiness of God Himself as the starting point. We could look at many different passages, but let's go to the book of Isaiah. First, Isaiah 5:15-16. These verses sound a lot like how we normally think of holiness: doing things right, ethically, being pure. Note the connection between holiness and justice/righteousness. That is, meeting up to the standards of purity and justice. There is a lot of overlap between those words. God does everything right, separate from any deviation or sin. But there's another, broader use of this language in Isaiah 40:25, in the midst of some very reassuring promises, we see God identifying Himself as "the Holy One" as a way of saying that no one is like Him. That statement is not limited to His moral purity; He is incomparable. There is nobody like Him; He is set apart from everything and everyone that isn't God. There is only one Being in that category, and to say that He is one is to say that He is holy. In Isaiah 57:15, "holy" is again used to describe God as high and lifted up above everything He has created. That really is the more fundamental idea of God's holiness. You get a sense of that when you read about Isaiah's experience when God called him (Isaiah 6). The angels have to shield their eyes, and they are saying "Holy, holy, holy..." The angels have nothing to be ashamed of; they are perfect beings. Unlike Isaiah, they won't be convicted about sin; they don't have any. God doesn't have to stay away from them and they don't have to stay away from him because somehow they aren't pure. Yet even they, for all of their power, purity, and glory, have to block their eyes. God is above even these perfect, supernatural, sinless beings. There is nobody like Him.

What happens when that God chooses to bring the poor and lowly into fellowship with Him? When He chooses to graciously enter a relationship with human beings? The same language begins to be used about them—the language of "apartness," holiness. What does that mean? One way to help answer that question is to look at times when other things are set apart to God, things that don't have the capacity to sin in the first place because they are inanimate objects. In the tabernacle, there was a *holy place* and a *most holy place*. A "place" cannot sin! One of the first times this comes up is when Moses is in front of the burning bush and God tells him that the ground on which he stands is holy. How can ground be holy, in the sense of separate from sin? Or, when the bowls and spoons used to carry ingredients for sacrifices are called holy? They can't sin—"holy" must mean something else. Here's what it means: you had better not take that fork and use it to flip the hamburgers on your grill! It's not for those purposes. It is set apart from common usage, devoted to a special Godward purpose. That fork is holy because it was consecrated by God to a special function that, in a special way, is used for His worship. Or, when the Sabbath is called holy, set apart from other days. A holy city, holy temple, or holy Scriptures. They don't have the capacity to sin; the purpose is that they are in a unique category, attached to the one and only God. They are holy, or "saintly"—it's the same word.

Particularly with that thought in mind, the Bible begins to call people holy. It's not that they are sinless; far from it! It's not that we are consistent, even after we are regenerated, in obeying God. Rather, it's that we are placed in a unique category, yanked out of the common people of the world and put into a special Godward category. That's how God uses us going forward, belonging to Him as His personal possession. Go to I Peter 2:9. In words first used of the people of Israel in Exodus and Deuteronomy, Peter now applies them to Christians, members of the church today. All of these descriptions are synonymous, highlighting the idea that we are different. Now, you may be different as in "odd," but that's not the point here. The King James version uses the phrase "peculiar people," and that makes it sound like we're weird. We might be weird! But that's not what this is talking about. It's God specifically

choosing us, pulling us out and putting us in a special group of people devoted to Him and that He is using to fulfill His purposes in the world. All these labels convey the idea that we are *special*. I hesitate a little to use that word because it sounds sentimental, and it might cause us to focus on our own individuality somehow. But it's not about that. God, in His mercy, has separated us from humanity and put us in this unique category, as the objects of His special favor. We are saints.

There is a book on the doctrine of positional sanctification by David Peterson called *Possessed by God*. That's the idea of being a saint: we are God's unique possession. How can that be? Well, that's our second question:

*How* is it possible and accurate for us to be called that, given everything we know about ourselves? Our failures, our inconsistencies even after conversion; how can God continue to call any of His people, at any moment, a saint? If you do not really grasp the truth of this, read I Corinthians again. Paul goes after those people for all manner of shocking sins that were going on in a local church! People were divided over here, immoral over there, people taking each other to court, arrogantly using their spiritual gifts to one-up each other, lack of love...and yet, from the beginning Paul calls them unique ones, saints, set apart to God. It almost sounds inappropriate or irreverent for him to use that language. How can it be right?

The answer is really the message from last week: our union in Christ, particularly two matters that we touched on. First is the doctrine of justification, positional sanctification. It's our legal status before God and the courts of His justice. What is going on with reference to that legal position? It's what God says in I Corinthians 5:21. I read it illustrated in this way: think about sitting at your computer with two documents opened. One has your name as its title and the other has Christ's. You look at your document and it is a lengthy record of every sin that you have ever committed, from bitterness to lust to anger to faithlessness to laziness, and every time you've given into those temptations, in graphic detail. You look over at the document titled "Christ," and listed there is everything He ever did, from His childhood on up. Perfectly obeying His parents, loving not only His neighbor but His enemies, totally submitting to the will of God, obeying every one of His laws...and it also is a lengthy document, running through His 33 years of life. Everything is laid out in perfect detail; He was sinless and totally submitted to the demands of God.

God Himself then comes along, takes the mouse, and scrolls over to the document with your name. He selects the whole document and hits Ctrl-X, for "cut." Everything disappears. He goes over to Christ's document and pastes it in. Then He takes all of Christ's accomplishments, cuts them out of His document, and pastes them into yours. He then *saves* the documents. Now, we understand that no analogy is perfect—Christ resurrected from the dead and was received into God's presence, but as far as the legal charge of every last bit of my sin, they are all pasted into Christ's document, and His obedience to all the requirements of God are pasted into mine. And nobody can change them. If that is the way things are in the presence of God, that is part of the explanation about how God can call me a "holy one." Before His court, on the books, He sees all of Jesus' merits. No wonder He can call me a saint—He is not treating me in the legalities of my status according to my struggles and failures. It is all secured by the righteousness of Christ.

But there is even more involved. It's the other side, the transfer that we have experienced out of the dominion of sin into the dominion of God, as Romans 6 said. We died in reference to sin as our ruling authority, and even though we are tempted, from God's standpoint sin is an intruder, a usurping power

that legally doesn't belong on the throne. It has been voted out by God Himself! It is impossible for sin to be in the legal position of ruling me any more; as Colossians 1:13 says, we have been transferred out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son. Even though that darkness keeps encroaching, pursuing, and attacking, we are not in that kingdom any more. We are under a different Master. Sin is illegally trying to gain superiority over me. Because God views me as being under Christ's authority, He can call me a saint. I belong in this kingdom. Jesus is now my Lord. Whether I understand that and whether I feel it every day, because of whatever reasons—the power of the flesh, my giving in to it, how much sleep I got last night, the bad mood I'm in because of something rude someone said to me—no matter what I feel like, because of the legal status and God's viewpoint of me, because I'm under the dominion of Jesus, *I am a saint*. That's the reality.

So what? How should this make any difference to me? Well, let me share a couple of thoughts with you. Here is one application, the main idea I've been trying to drive at: If we can get this, it should cause us to revel in the privilege that we enjoy. If I'm a Christian, God has not allowed me to go my own way. At some point, He intervened and yanked me from that destructive path. He has not allowed me to go away from His presence and blessing. He has distinguished me and set me apart for a relationship with Himself. Even though it's hard to fathom, it is reality: He views me as sacred! He views me as a special treasure, and that position is something to be marveled at. We ought to delight in the dignity of that position, in the grace that God has lavished on us to put us in that position.

There is something called *esprit de corps*—a certain positive attitude created by belonging to a certain group. Everyone in that group is bound together by the name, the accomplishments of the group. Usually, that is hard to separate from pride. No analogy is perfect, but there is a kind of *esprit de corps* in being one of God's holy ones.

My family has become fascinated with Steph Curry and his ability to score three-pointers from just about anywhere on the court. I was thinking about how it must feel to be on that team, the Golden State Warriors. "We are it! I'm his teammate; we go out and do stuff together; I'm a part of his group. We're better than everyone else!" That's where the pride comes in. But there's just something positive and inspiring about being part of a special group.

We are part of the people of God. We're not just anybody. We have been elevated to this glorious position. Actually, where the illustration breaks down is because it's not that we are so great! It's just because! The pride part of *esprit de corps* is cast aside because the whole point is that I don't deserve it; I'm no better than anybody else. Yet I am in this group anyway; I've been made part of it because of the grace of God. Just because He chose to love me, not because there's anything great about me. I'm a saint. What does that do for my self-image in the world? Why do I need to crave the approval of some worldly person when the God of heaven looks at me and says I am special? He has yanked me out of all these condemned people and done for me what He has not done for many of them. He put us into His group. What other position could you want, to make you feel like you have "arrived," like you are something valuable?

My sainthood does not change with my ongoing struggles. Please go to I Corinthians 6:9-11, which describes people who were tolerating serious problems in their midst and were in the process of being corrected. See how Paul describes them—I am sure that some of those people were still tempted. Tempted to greed, immorality, stealing, or whatever else was their background. Just because they came to Christ doesn't mean those temptations disappeared. And it may be that those people occasionally fell

back into those sins. This is no excuse; that has to be dealt with and repented of, but the point is, if they had really been transferred out of that kingdom, they were still enjoying the same status: washed, sanctified, justified. They were special in God's sight even though they had some very serious weaknesses.

To grasp that, to revel in it, will not become an excuse for giving in to the flesh. That's my last point: there is not only a privilege, but a responsibility. When we grapple with this idea of being saints, we take our responsibility seriously. On the basis of this positional truth, we are enabled to start separating from sin. I have a few more passages to look at. First, Colossians 3:9 again. You'll remember that there was a long list of things to avoid and a long list of things they were called to do, and what was the foundation of that? It is all related to their saintly status. The reason they are told not to do certain things is that they have been broken away from them objectively. As far as the new way they are supposed to live, look at verse 12. On the basis of that status, put on those new qualities. Everything is rooted in the objective, positional truth. You already are holy; now become holy. Become what you already are. Progressive sanctification is a growth, experientially, into what positional sanctification means. Turn to I Peter 1:13-16: In most cases, I don't think we doubt what we are supposed to do. We tend to know what steps we ought to take. The issue is what is going to happen to get us over the hump, to stay away from sin and do the right thing. Surely, if you and I really grasped our position as saints and our hearts were truly moved, that would be the result. If my heart were thrilled with recalling, appreciating, enjoying the privilege of *being* a saint, I would *live* like a saint.