

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**ALL SAINT'S DAY**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**November 1, 2009**  
**“HONORING THE SAINTS”**  
**Matthew 5:1-12**  
**8:45 A.M. SERVICE**

In our celebrity-conscious, star-struck society the people who live sacrificial lives of love and service tend to be forgotten. We honor those who have everything, rather than those who give everything.

The Beatitudes of Jesus are not a list of rules or laws. They are descriptions of a human life transformed by God. Here is a portrayal of the truly spiritual person. Jesus himself personifies the beatitudes that are part of his teaching.

It is instructive that today we honor the lives of the saints, and only secondarily their words. Knowing the truth and doing the truth are two different things. We have only begun when we discover what we ought to believe and how we ought to live. We are to put our beliefs and convictions into practice. God is calling us to a living faith.

The lives of the saints are different from our ordinary lives. One writer, Edith Wharton said, **“I don’t believe in God, but I do believe in His saints.”** The lives of the saints are filled with goodness, while our lives are ambiguous mixtures of good and evil. The lives of the saints are godly, while most lives are mundane. In short, a true saint is characterized by holy living. **“Holy”** describes a thing or a person consecrated to God. It also refers to moral and spiritual excellence. We see holy living as so different from ordinary living as to be unattainable by us. Jesus, however, does not see things this way at all.

If we are honest, most of us have to admit that we have never taken the Beatitudes of Jesus very seriously. We may have found them inspiring and thought-provoking. We may have thought them beautiful, or perhaps a bit mysterious. But few of us have looked to them for help in facing the challenges of daily life. It frustrates us that the Beatitudes are not goal-oriented. Neither are

they practical guides to success. They are not even calls to action. Take **“blessed are those who mourn,”** for example. Can we *decide* to mourn? Should we aspire to grieve? How are we to understand the Beatitudes?

Matthew’s Gospel has an interesting account of how Jesus gave the Beatitudes. When he saw the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain, sat down, and began to teach. In the Bible, mountains are highly symbolic. They are where someone meets God or hears the divine voice. Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. The Gospel writer sees one greater than Moses presenting a way of life that demands more than keeping rules and laws.

The Beatitudes of Jesus are different from the Ten Commandments. Jesus never gave his followers a list of laws to be obeyed. His teachings do not involve do’s and don’ts, or **“thou shalt”** and **“thou shalt not.”** Wouldn’t life be simpler if they did? Simpler, yes, but not joyful, or meaningful, or fulfilling! A robot can be programmed to do some things and avoid doing others, and a robot has no mind or heart or freedom. Do’s and don’ts are for our dependent and immature years, and then are largely for our safety. But Jesus calls us to abundant life, life in its fullness.

Beatitudes are not prescriptive, but descriptive. They do not tell us what to do to be happy, but describe the kind of person who is happy. Beatitudes describe internal attitudes. They reveal the content of a life committed to the will of God. These internal attitudes may be expressed or violated in many different ways, but Jesus says they are the source of blessedness or true happiness.

Jesus’ eight beatitudes deserve more individual attention than is impossible in a single sermon. But we can identify them briefly. The **“poor in spirit”** are the genuinely humble who trust, not in themselves as the prideful do, but utterly in God. Those **“who mourn”** refers primarily to those who are sorrowful in the recognition of their sin. They find comfort in God’s love and grace. The **“meek”** are those who accept reality without anger or bitterness. They are not aggressive, presumptuous, or self-seeking, and they, ironically, inherit the earth. Those who **“hunger and thirst for righteousness,”** i.e. for goodness and justice, are those who are eager to take moral action, as contrasted with those who care only about physical appetites. The **“merciful”** are those who show forbearance and compassion for someone who has no right to hope for kindness. The **“pure in heart”** are those who seek God’s will with singleness of mind. The **“peacemakers”** are all who work for peace at any level, from interpersonal to

international. Those who are “*persecuted for righteousness’ sake*” are any who suffer for love, justice, or the will of God. All of these know blessedness.

The first four beatitudes have generally to do with our relationship with God, and the last four relate more to our relationships with others. Seen in this way, they call to mind Jesus’ response when he was asked to name the greatest commandment. Love God with your whole being, he said, and love your neighbor as yourself. The saints of our faith are being described in the Beatitudes, but Jesus gave them to ordinary people such as you and me. You see, Jesus sees more potential in us than we have seen in ourselves.

Jesus’ Beatitudes identify for us those who are truly happy. They also stand in judgment on our accepted ways of seeking happiness. Until we have seen our misguided ways for what they are, we will make little progress in following Jesus. The culture in which most of us are immersed has little interest in humility, mourning, meekness, or purity of heart. Rather, it prizes pride, self-sufficiency, and self-indulgence. Money matters more than character, success more than integrity, and our sons and daughters receive this message every day of their lives. The sorrowful side of honest introspection, the meekness of genuine spiritual maturity, and the noble aspirations of the serious-minded are not worth much in our cultural markets. Our children and young people desperately need vital models of holy living, and they need an image of Jesus that has not been co-opted by the ruling principalities and powers.

Holy living is a possibility for every one of us. We must begin where we are, confessing our sin, our need, and our longing for true blessedness. Lord, we weep for what we have done and for what we have failed to do. We weep for the sins of those who should know better but who have turned from you. We weep for the social, economic, and political sins of our country and of all the countries in the world. Have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and guide us into paths of holy living.

Tragically, Christian history is not without its own episodes of warfare and bloodshed. Christians have battled often over the tenets and beliefs of the faith, when orthodox belief was deemed more important than holy living. Jesus made it clear; however, that moral character and sacrificial service are far more important than doctrinal purity. Loving God and the neighbor take priority over any creed.

If you have a desire to live and work devotedly and sacrificially, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.