

Dr. Carlyle Marney once remarked that a person can be understood as being similar to a house. We have our living rooms, where we entertain, and our basements, where we hide the trash. The way to observe All Saints' Day, he suggested, is to walk out into your front yard and salute the people on your balcony. The balcony people in our lives are those who have gone before us, who have been our encouragers, who have left a legacy. **That's what we do on this Saints' Day. We salute all the saints who have gone before us, whose faithfulness provided us with the faith we have today.**

In John Bunyan's classic work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, we are introduced to two characters, Christian and Hopeful, who are drawing near to the river of death. As they reach the river they are met by two shining figures whose raiment shines like gold and whose faces shine as the light. These two shining figures are able to lead Christian and Hopeful as they emerge from the river of death into the Celestial city. These shining figures are not angels. Rather, they are the saints of God shining as lights in the world of darkness and sin. **Saints that are Truly Happy.** That is who we are to be shining lights helping the wanderer find his or her way home.

One of the most beautiful portrayals of saints is found in our lesson for today from Revelation: *"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'*

"All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'"

"Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes who are they, and where did they come from?' "I answered, 'Sir, you know.' "And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"

Notice who these saints are: *"Before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . ."*

Our faith has always been a UNIVERSAL FAITH. It is amazing that so many Christians forget this. **Saints of God come in every color, speak every language.**

Pastor John Ortberg tells a wonderful story about Clarence Jordan, best known for his *Cotton Patch Gospels*.

Jordan went one time to do revival services at a church in the Deep South. This was more than fifty years ago, when segregation was the norm in the South. Clarence Jordan got up to preach, and he realized that the congregation was not segregated at all. There were black folks and white folks all together. After the service, he asked the pastor, an old hillbilly preacher: "How did your church get this way?"

The old hillbilly preacher said: "What way?" Clarence Jordan said: "Well, black and white folks all together. Integrated. Is that because of the Supreme Court decision?"

The preacher answered: "Supreme Court! Why would Christians need the Supreme Court to tell us that black folks and white folks ought to be all together?"

Jordan asked: "Well how did it happen? What's the history?" This old preacher said: "Well, there used to be about twenty people in this church . . . When the old preacher died, they couldn't get no one to preach . . . So after about two months, I told the deacons I'd preach. They couldn't get anybody else, so they said, 'Yes.' I got up the next Sunday, opened the Bible, put my finger down on that verse that says: 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus' (Colossians 3:11). So I preached on that. I told them how

Jesus makes all kinds of people one. When I finished, the deacons said they wanted to talk to me in the back room. When they got there, they told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preachin' no more."

Clarence asked: "What'd you do?" The old preacher said: "I fired them deacons! If a man's not gonna' 'deac,' he oughta be fired!" Clarence Jordan was amazed. "Why didn't they fire you?" he asked.

"They didn't hire me," said the hillbilly preacher, "so they couldn't fire me! You know, once I found out what bothered those people, I gave it to them week after week. I put the knife in the same place Sunday after Sunday."

Jordan was stunned. "And they put up with it?" he asked.

"Not really," said the old preacher. "I preached that church down to four people. Sometimes revival happens not when people come in, but when people go out. If people were going to stand in the way of the moving of the Spirit of God, it's better they be gone. After that, we decided that we were going to build the church on people who were actually serious about following Jesus. And that's when it started to grow."

That night Clarence Jordan stayed at the home of a member of that church, a graduate of Yale, a college professor, who had a PhD in English Literature. He drove seventy miles each week to go to this church. Clarence asked that brilliant young professor: "Why do you go to that church to hear an old hillbilly preach? You have a PhD from Yale. He can't utter a single grammatical sentence?" The young man said: "Sir, I go to that church, because that man preaches the Gospel."

And that is the Gospel. All people on the earth are represented around the throne of God. That's the first thing we want to notice about the saints of God.

Here's the second: Notice how they are DRESSED. "They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands . . ."

White is, of course, symbolic of holiness, purity. These saints were in the presence of a holy God, which meant they must be holy too. I don't know about you, but I don't meet very many holy people. How did these saints in heaven get that way? "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

We don't talk in the church today about being washed in the blood of the lamb. It's a little graphic for our modern sensibilities. In Revelation, it is simply a symbolic way of saying these saints have been made worthy to inherit that which was promised by the Father because of Christ's death on the cross. In other words they are standing around the throne the same way all of us will one day stand around that throne, by the grace of God. If getting into heaven was a matter of merit, we would all be in trouble.

There's a story about Mother Teresa. In this story Mother Teresa is in heaven and she is dining with God. The only thing in front of them is a couple of tuna fish sandwiches. While they're eating, she looks down into Hades and sees the citizens of that realm feasting on steak, lobster, and crème brûlée.

"Not that I'm complaining," Mother Teresa says to God, "but why are they eating lavishly, and we're having tuna fish sandwiches?" "Well," says God, "with just the two of us up here, I figure, why cook?"

If getting to heaven were based on merit, maybe Mother Teresa might make it and a few others. But you and I? We would be on the outside looking in. Our admittance to the select company will not be based on merit, but on God's unconditional love for us, God's amazing grace. You may think sometimes that we talk about grace too much in the church today. You need to understand that there are many people, even many church people, who do not really believe that God loves them unconditionally.

Pastor Billy Hornsby, in his book, *The Attractional Church*, tells about his experience of Christian faith. He grew up in a very strict Christian household. He said that he and his siblings each had chores to do each day, like preparing their own breakfast and ironing clothes. One morning when Hornsby was around ten years old, he was ironing his shirt. He could just see the top of the ironing board and was pressing a shirt for school. The iron slipped, and before he could catch it, it burned his chest. He screamed and ran to get some ice from the refrigerator. He writes, "Mama calmly looked at me and said, 'See there, God punished you!'" He goes on to say, "If she said this once," he says,

“she said it hundreds of times. It was her doctrine of God and forgiveness. She wanted to make sure we knew that we were accountable for our actions and the consequences . . . of everything we did. This was my experience,” he writes, “and it was what I had as a basis of faith: Do bad and get punished, but never forgiven.” He said, “I needed and wanted forgiveness.”

He met an atheist one time who told Hornsby there was no God. This made Billy Hornsby mad. He said, “I knew that there was a God in heaven because He had been punishing me all my life, according to Mama.” Strangely enough, this atheist’s statement about there being no God motivated Hornsby to go into the scripture and to learn for himself who God is and what God expects out of us. And in his research he discovered the God he always hoped existed a God of love and acceptance and forgiveness.

There are still far too many religious people who have a god who plays havoc with their lives and who punishes them for sins of which they are not even aware. So, it is important to note that the saints of God have all their sins taken away because of God’s great love for them. Notice who they are and how they’re dressed.

Finally, notice what they have COME THROUGH. The Experience They Have Shared. *These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.* Note those words: ***“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.”***

It is important to understand that God’s promises are to a very special group of people, those who follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Sure we are accepted as we are, but once we turn to Christ, ***we are to try to live just as he lived, love as he loved, and forgive as he forgives.***

Many of us have a **MUSHY KIND OF “FAITH”** that says, ***“Everything’s all right. Jesus loves me, this I know. It doesn’t matter what I do with my life. I can go ahead living for myself as if I am the only one on earth that matters.”***

We are too often like the little boy who says to his father, **“Let’s play darts. I’ll throw and you say ‘wonderful!’”**

That’s what we want out of God. Tell us that we are wonderful. Tell us that we are accepted, forgiven, loved.

But don’t tell us that our robes are dirty. Don’t tell us there are some changes that need to be made in our life. Don’t tell us that we need to be washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Let me repeat those important words from Max Lucado, ***“God loves us just as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way. He wants us to be like Jesus.”***

Who are the saints around the throne of God? Everybody on this earth is a candidate for sainthood. None of us is worthy of it, but because of what Christ has done on our behalf--**SAINTHOOD comes to us as a free gift.**

Once it is received, however, we are to join the holy company seeking to bring ***light to a world of darkness*** through lives that reflect the ***glory of Christ***—lives that have truly learned ***“How To Be Truly Happy and share that Happiness with Others.”***

SO LET US GO OUT AND SHARE ALL OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS-AND SEE THE CHANGES WE CAN MAKE!!! Amen.