

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (20-1-1991 Cleland Baptist Church)

Philippians 1:1 (part 2)
Additional Bible reading: John 17:1-19

Introduction

Now we come to the second half of the greeting, and the description of the readers as “all the saints”.

We cannot begin to look at this subject without clearing the ground. “Saint” is one of the most misunderstood words. We pass churches known as “St John’s”, “St Michael’s”, and go inside and see pictures on stained glass windows – “saints” with haloes over their heads, pale faces, small hands, gorgeous robes – and this becomes our image of a what a saint is. We use the term loosely: “He is well on his way to sainthood”, “I don’t profess to be a saint”, “You can’t be a saint where I work.” We give the impression that a saint is a special class of Christian, miles ahead on the road of Christian life, entitled to the special degree of “saint” before his name.

We have been deeply influenced by Medieval and Roman Catholic teaching. The term “saint” was given to people who lived long ago, who were especially holy, performed miracles, and had arrived in glory. People prayed to them because they were especially near God. Therefore they could gain favours for them, and they would be commemorated on a special day each year.

This description of a saint is miles away from the New Testament definition. In the New Testament there are no special elite, and the rest ordinary Christians. All church members are “saints”. If a man is a Christian, he is a saint. If he is not a saint, he is not a Christian. Nowhere in scripture are we encouraged to pray to a special group who are near to God. How could they hear us, or be able to help us? The New Testament is very clear that we pray to the Father through the Son, the only mediator, the only one able to get us blessing from God, through the Holy Spirit. Protestant reformers abolished prayer to saints, because it was unscriptural, and treated saints as God, therefore denying Christ’s sole mediatorship.

New Testament definition of saint

At the beginning of Philippians, and indeed all his letter to other churches, he calls the Christians in the various churches “saints” - $\alpha\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma$ – holy ones, separated, set apart to God, separate from evil and the world, separated to the Lord and to His service.

The idea began back in the Old Testament. Israel was a holy nation, separated from the rest of the nations, with a special place in God’s purposes (Exodus 19:5,6; Numbers 23:9). Moses was a holy man, separated to God. The holy vessels in the Temple were separated to God. Then there are references to holy ground, holy water, holy place, holy hill, holy garments, holy oil, holy priest – all separated, set apart, dedicated to God and for His use.

Then God called a new Israel into being – the Christian church – because Israel rejected Christ. They became the holy nation, holy people, and members of the church

are the holy ones – saints. Any and every Christian is included in that description. **You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light** (1 Peter 2:9,10). The reason is that we are in Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus, God has called us to be His people. In Christ Jesus we are saved. In Christ Jesus we are set apart to belong to God. We no longer belong to the world or ourselves, because we are united by faith to Jesus Christ. He is the core and centre of our being saints. It is not because we are religious, good, nice or pleasant, but because we are redeemed by Christ Jesus and in union with Him by faith.

This does not mean we are “goody-goody”, or good for nothing. We are good for something – belonging to God, being at His disposal, and available for Him. Being a saint is not a goal we are aiming at and hope to reach one day. It is our status, which we enjoy the moment we belong to Christ Jesus. Other translations of “saint” – J.B.Phillips says “true Christians”; NEB says “God’s people”.

Responsibilities of saints

Since we belong to God and are His people, what are the implications for us? We are called to fulfil His purpose. He has a plan for each life. This plan touches our home, work, service in the church, and our place in the world. We are set apart that this plan might be fulfilled.

We are called and set apart that we might also show forth the character of the God to whom we belong. We are to reflect His goodness, purity, separateness from evil, and His love of righteousness. A child was once asked what a saint was. He thought of the saint depicted in the stained glass window in his church, and replied, “A man the light shines through.” A saint is, indeed, a man the Light shines through.

This does not mean that we shall ever be perfect in this life. The older we get, the more we are aware of sinfulness within. In one of Paul’s last letters, he called himself “chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). The riper the ears of corn, the more their heads hang down.

Christian in “Pilgrim’s Progress” walked a long and difficult pathway before he arrived home with God. He went through many ups and downs, but the important thing is that he was always moving in the right direction. We need to be the same – our faces firmly and resolutely set towards God.

The challenge is – because we are set apart for God, do we stand out in the world, are we different? Is it evident in our words and behaviour that we do not belong to the world but to God? The first Christians conquered the ancient world just by being Christians. They were different, marked men. Their lifestyle and behaviour left a mark.

The place where they worked made no difference. According to Philippians 4:22, there were saints in the household of Caesar. Caesar was Nero, one of the worst blaggards ever ruling the Roman Empire. Being a Christian in Nero’s household was

not an easy life. Do you imagine your place of work to be tougher for a “saint” than that?

Are we changing standards, or are standards changing us? Do we name the name of Christ and worship with His people on Sundays, but then live the rest of the week being the same as the rest of the world, the greedy grabbing crowd, enjoying its pleasures and participating in its pleasures? **Do not let the world squeeze you into its mould** (Romans 12:2, J.B.Phillips). In the end of the day, our environment will mould us, or we will mould it. Cannot have it both ways.

Privileges of being saints

What are the privileges of belonging to Christ? He takes special interest in us, and we are His people; He is especially favourable towards us; He is concerned about us and our welfare; He looks on us with a Father’s eye, and showers us with special blessings. This brings amazing comfort and consolation. The almighty, absolute God, ruler of heaven and earth, has special interest in us because we are his people.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them (Psalm 34:7). So many of the Psalms tell us that the man who is in a right relationship with God, who belongs to Him in a special way, has God watching over him, keeping an eye on him, surrounding him with His special love. **The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him** (2 Chronicles 16:9). He looks for opportunities to bless His people. The Lord reassured his disciples that the very hairs of their heads were numbered. He told them not to be worried or troubled, if only they knew the interest their heavenly father had in them and his personal concern for them.

This brings us to the mysterious doctrine of angels. There is clear teaching that there are guardian angels. **Their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven** (Matthew 18:10). According to Hebrews, angels are **ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation** (Hebrews 1:14). Heavenly hosts – these unseen ministers of God, surround us.

We are peculiarly under His grace. We are the special objects of His favour, in a specially privileged position. So whatever happens to us, wherever we go, whatever our circumstances, we are secure. **If God is for us, who can be against us?** (Romans 8:31).

The second privilege is that we can enjoy His resources and His power. If God calls us to display His character and show forth His praises, to reflect His goodness and purity, to be men whom the Light shines through, He will also supply the means. Once we are under His government, we can also enjoy His gifts. He lives within us. We are the habitation of God through the Spirit. He is constantly at work, teaching, disciplining, shaping and empowering. The Holy Spirit is transforming our character transformed into Christ-likeness. It may be a slow process, but when He is in control of our lives, there is growth and progress.

There are two sides to enjoying all this. It is illustrated by the story of Mary and Martha. We must begin like Mary – sitting at the feet of Jesus, taking time to be holy,

acquiring the infinite resources in Christ Jesus, abiding in Him, having quiet confidence and complete trust in Him, committed to Him and resting in Him. Then on the other side, we need to learn from Martha the place for doing as well as being, trying as well as trusting, the place for activity and service. Trusting like Mary, and busy like Martha. Trusting and obeying are the two sides of Christian character, and as they are exercised, so we enjoy His rich resources. Life and power flow into us just as life in the vine flows into the branches. The life of the parent tree is ours. We need to realize these resources and possess our possessions.

Conclusion

If we are Christians, we are saints in Christ Jesus. There is not an elite or favoured few. We are all set apart by God through Christ Jesus, separated from the world to be His. We must ensure we are in the plan and programme He has for our lives, and that we show forth His character. Then there are privileges to be enjoyed, for we are under His special protection and care. He is our Father, so we need not fear. There are also the privileges of His resources, to be enjoyed daily.

You are God's property. Make these truths your own. Declare and affirm them. I am His property – His by creation and by redemption. I am not my own but His. I belong to Him. He is at work in my life, in every fibre of my physical and mental life. My complex personality has to be handed over to Him daily so I am available to Him to do what He wills, where, how and when.

Is there some compartment to which I have never admitted Him? I must open all doors to Him, and hand over all the keys. Make Him at home in my life.

At the same time, let's consider this thought of the church of God as being saints, separated ones. It reminds us that not everyone in the congregation comes into this category. Some are not separated to Him, do not belong to Him, and are not His people. The privileges we spoke of are not theirs to enjoy. The help and encouragement of being His is only for believers. There are always conditions to Bible promises, and these promises are for saints. They are not for unbelievers.

Respond to the Gospel in His Son. Turn from your sin. Separate yourself from the world and its practices. Dedicate yourself to the One who died for you that you might belong to Him.