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What is a Saint?



KYLE BUTT, M.Div.

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One of our readers posed an excellent question. He asked: “Paul talks a lot about saints. He writes about, ‘to the saints at Ephesus, etc.’ Who are these saints? Do they know they are saints? Did Paul know he was a saint? I understand it that sainthood is a reward for later.”

The concept of a saint and sainthood is often misunderstood. Due to the teachings of certain religious groups, sainthood is supposedly only achieved by “super” Christians who lived an almost perfect life and did some type of verifiable miracle. After the person’s death, his or her life and actions are put through an extensive process of nominating, voting, and ultimately confirmation as a saint. When we look into the Bible, however, we see a completely different, and much simpler explanation of what a saint actually is.

The short answer to the sainthood question is that God refers to any person who becomes a Christian as a saint. The word “saint” is a form of the term “sanctify” and simply means one who is set apart in holy service to God. First Corinthians 1:2 gives us a clear example of this use of the term: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” Notice that the letter is written to all the members of the church in Corinth. They are all said to be sanctified, or set apart. Furthermore, Paul insists that all the Christians were “called to be saints” with “**all** those....” The Bible declares that all Christians, everywhere, are saints.

To better understand this idea, consider the concept of being “sanctified.” What group of people is sanctified, or set apart for holy service to God? In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul reminded the Corinthian church about sins they had committed in the past. He then stated, “But you were washed, but you **sanctified**, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God”

(vs. 11) Notice that all the Christians in Corinth were sanctified and set apart to God's service, not just a chosen, elite group.

The beginning of Paul's epistle to the Romans clarifies sainthood even further. Paul explains that He is a servant of Christ "separated," or better translated "set apart," to the Gospel of God (1:1). He then writes, "To **all** who are in Rome, beloved of God, **called to be saints.**" Again, take note of Paul's use of the word "**all**" to refer to all the Christians in Rome who were "called" to be saints. How, then, is a person called to be a saint? Paul hints at that with his statement about being set apart "to the gospel of God." In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, He more directly states that "God from the beginning chose you [the church of the Thessalonians—KB] for salvation through **sanctification** by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our **gospel**, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." God, through the inspired Paul, explains that any person who has become a Christian through belief and obedience to the Gospel (see 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8), has been sanctified and is considered a saint.

Depending on the translation you use, the terms saint or saints are used approximately 60 times in the New Testament. Even a brief look at those verses will show that the Bible contains no concept of a "Super Christian" being a saint. Paul concluded his letter to the Philippian church with these words: "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you" (4:21). He wanted the Philippians to understand that all Christians are saints. These saints were alive and well. Their lives had not been granted sainthood after their deaths. Nor did they have to verify that they had performed a documented miracle to achieve a higher level of holiness. What had they done to become saints? They simply obeyed the Gospel of Christ when it was preached to them, just as the 3,000 did on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

It is sometimes tempting to compare our lives to others and view ourselves as "less holy." We might even have stated in the past, when asked about our behavior, "Well, I'm no saint." The fact is, however, that no one ever gained a level of holiness that could earn a place in heaven. Christians are holy, able to be called saints, not because they earned salvation or because they are super spiritual. On the contrary, God made "Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him [Christ—KB]" (2 Corinthians 5:21). All faithful Christians are holy saints,

not because they are spiritual giants, but because of “the precious blood of Christ” which He shed “as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:19).

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