

Who Are They **Revelation 7:9-17 and Matthew 5:1-12**

Introduction

You've heard me say before that I married into a very large family.

- Karen is one of eight children.
- All eight are married, and all have multiple children themselves. To be exact in that next generation there are 25 grandchildren.
- Of those 25 grandchildren, eleven are now married.
- Those 11 marriages have produced 12 great grandchildren.
- Total all of that up ... If everyone showed up to my in-laws home for Thanksgiving dinner, the attendance would be 66.

Over the past few years and for the foreseeable future, I have been introduced to a number of boyfriends and girlfriends who look at the vast sea of Bryants. Their eyes are wide open in shock and amazement, and you see the wheels spinning in their heads as they try to remember the names of everyone in the room.

The most frequently asked question among this group of newcomers is not surprising:

Uncle Tom, who are they?

That's the same question posed to the Apostle John when he observes the vast sea of white-robed worshippers gathering around the throne of God.

Who are they, and where did they come from?

John confesses his ignorance. He doesn't know who those people are any more than the young man sitting beside me knows the identity of that relative across the room. The answer given by the elder in John's vision, coupled with the description provided in Matthew 5, make the identify clear.

#1: THESE ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE WASHED THEIR ROBES

Revelation 7:14 says:

... they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:14)

The Bible has much to say about both white robes and soiled robes.

- In the ancient world it was absolutely forbidden to approach a god with a robe that was not clean.
- And in the early church a new Christian would wear a white robe into the river as he/she was being baptized.
- That purity symbolism is the same reason a bride comes to the altar on her wedding day and the Lone Ranger wore a white cowboy hat. The meaning of it is etched into our minds.

But the fascinating thing is how those robes become white. Picture it. Every person that has ever born comes into this world wearing a dirty robe – a robe soiled by our sinful nature and further soiled as we add to it the sins that we commit over time. Day after day it gets dirtier and dirtier.

Until laundry day comes.

There will come a day when every one of us recognizes how dirty our robes are. The Holy Spirit makes that happen.

About 10 years ago Reader's Digest conducted a contest. They posed a riddle and invited people to send in their best answers.

- The question: *What has six eyes but cannot see?*
- The winning answer: *Three men, occupying a house filled with dirty laundry, overflowing trash cans, and a sink full of dirty dishes."*

How those men figure out their need for a cleansing is another matter, but deep within every human heart the Holy Spirit works to make us aware that we need to be washed. We begin to see ourselves as Isaiah described us:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags ... (Isaiah 64:6)

And if we turn to Christ, if we come to Him and confess our sins and begin to follow Him in faith, those dirty gowns get washed in the shed blood of Jesus and become white. That imagery always amazes me. What a miracle that something can be washed in blood and turn out sparkling white. But that's what happens!

Isaiah explains it like this:

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

So the first thing we know about this vast sea of white robed people is that they are Christians. They are the forgiven ones, and only the forgiven ones. There is not a soiled robe among them. All have been washed white because of the blood of Jesus Christ.

#2: THESE ARE THE ONES WHO ARE VERY BLESSED

The remainder of the reading from Revelation describes many of the benefits enjoyed by that heavenly sea, but I want to capture a word from the Matthew's Gospel that sums it all up:

Blessed ...

Because these people of faith lived lives that exhibited such characteristics as purity of heart, meekness, a hungering after righteousness, a propensity for peace they receive blessings of God that sound like this:

- They get to see God
- They are satisfied
- They are recipients of God's mercy
- They are comforted
- They are inheritors of God's kingdom

That word "blessed" is a hard one to translate. There is no good English word that matches it. It is more than happiness or joy because those feelings can be generated within us.

- Blessing always has a source beyond ourselves. We can't generate "blessed."
- In Scriptural terms, that outside source is always God.

There is a verse in James that fits:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17)

Blessed is what happens when God looks at those who are white robed and living lives of faith as described in today's reading. He smiles and enjoys giving all of those good and perfect gifts. You might say, as we do in the benediction, God look on them with His favor.

Those gathered around the throne not only are people whose sins are forgiven. They also are people that God enjoys being around and sharing His goodness with.

That's not all ...

#3: THESE ARE THEY WHO LIVE COUNTER-CULTURALLY

In Revelation we read:

These are they who have come out of the great tribulation ... (Revelation 7:14)

And in Matthew we read:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:10)

These were people who lived and thought differently than the rest of the world. They saw things through the eyes of Christ. And they suffered because of that.

John wrote these words to a church that was experiencing intense persecution at the hands of the Romans. The stories are horrific – more horrifying than any Halloween movie produced by Hollywood.

And instead of turning them away from their faith in Christ, it drove them deeper in their faith.

Author Eugene Peterson says in Reversed Thunder, "While conflicts raged between good and evil, prayers went up from devout bands of 1st century Christians all over the Roman empire. Massive engines of persecution and scorn were raged against them. They had neither weapons nor votes. They had little money and no prestige."

Every follower of Christ will face an element of persecution. It is a part of the journey. For some of us, it will seem like a mild discomfort compared to the stories we hear. For others, it will be more intense. But regardless of the degree, the godly goal in the midst of it is:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-5)

APPLICATION

Who are those white robed people surrounding the throne of God?

- Believers who have turned to Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins
- Believers who enjoy the wonderful blessings of God poured out of those who seek to live lives that bring Him joy
- Believers who stood firm when their faith was challenged.

They are ones who could join the Apostle Paul in saying:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

They are the Church Triumphant.

Each of us can be in that vast sea someday. That this the great desire of Jesus Christ for our lives. You may not feel worthy but here's truth:

- If you come to Jesus in faith, and confess your sins to Him
- If you seek to live a life that makes God smile
- If you stand firm to the truths of Scripture when your faith is tested

You will be there. When those saints go marching, you will be a part of that number!

Let's pray ... Amen.