

Question: Can you give an example of a saint who lived their life according to the gospel?

Answer: All saints in one form or another adhered to the gospel life. They lived their lives according to the plan God laid out for them concurrent with the teachings and ministry of Jesus. One specific example of a saint who lived his life according to the gospel in almost every way is St. Francis of Assisi. Assisi is a town located one hundred miles northeast of Rome in Italy. Born in 1181 and baptized shortly after his birth, Francis was given the name “John.” He was renamed Francis which means “little Frenchman” by his father Pietro as a tribute to France, a country Pietro was always trying to do business with. Francis and his family were wealthy. His father was a businessman with dealings in both cloth trade and money lending. When Francis became old enough, he too joined his father in business ventures. One of the primary biographers of Francis, Thomas of Celano said that the young man, “squandered and wasted his time miserably.” In his young days Francis lived a life of vanity. He was wealthy, spoiled, and arrogant, and was known to even start street brawls!

The region Francis lived in throughout his life was always on the verge of warfare. In the year 1202, a young and arrogant Francis went to war against the city of Perugia. During the war he somehow ended up captured and was held prisoner for at least a year’s time. While in prison, Francis became extremely ill. Upon release and recuperation from illness, Francis felt that his life should be devoted to the military and he set off for glory as a knight in southern Italy. After only a day’s journey to his destination in southern Italy, Francis decided to return home and forget the glory of military life. The reason for Francis’ leaving is not exactly known, but it is believed that while in prison, Francis received a special call to assist lepers. He felt that while living in sin and being in the military, he could not minister to the lepers the way he should. It was a well known medieval law that anyone who had leprosy should be banned from interaction with the rest of society. Leprosy in medieval terms usually met any visible disfiguring disease. Early in his career as a minister to the lepers, Francis was praying when the Lord spoke to him saying that he needed to repair the church in ruins at San Damiano. Francis began repairing the church himself, but he needed money to pay for the materials. To get money, Francis began taking cloth from his father’s store without consent and selling them to buy materials. The idea of an upper-class man such as Francis repairing and building with his own hands was a repulsive act in the eyes of other social elites. His father was extremely concerned with his behavior, especially since Francis was using his cloth to get money for materials. Francis’ father went as far as locking him in their own cellar for a time with hope that he would come to his senses. When released from the cellar, Francis continued rebuilding the church and disobeying his father’s commands. Thomas of Celano describes the culminating scene between Francis and his father. He writes that Pietro went before the bishop of Assisi and pleaded for the Church to payback all the cloth Francis had sold for alms to rebuild the church at San Damiano. In a dramatic scene, Francis takes the clothes off of his back and gives them to his father. He then hands himself over to the bishop in a symbolic “rebirth” showing all present, including his father, that he was leaving his paternal family to be born in the church anew.

Francis continued his ministry to the lepers. It was about two years after his full embrace of the church that Francis received his call to truly live out the mission God was calling him to. While at Mass, Francis heard Matthew 10:7-10 which reads, “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give. Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick.” With these words, Francis knew exactly how he would spend the rest of his life. He first clothed himself in a single tunic, with a cord belt. Francis then used a piece of chalk to draw a cross on his tunic, thus becoming a “cross bearer.” He knew that to truly adhere to the words of the gospel he would live his life in poverty assisting the sick and dying. For Francis, the words of the gospel became the text he would live his life by as literally as possible with a personal focus on stewardship to all. Francis truly strove for perpetual love of neighbor no matter who *or* what they were. This is best illustrated with Francis’ love of animals and plants and his extended stewardship of brotherly love to them. Francis on one account by his biographer actually preached to birds so they too could hear the word of God and praise their creator. The realization for Francis that all things come from the same source, allowed him to appreciate the world as God’s gift.