

[Texting Question: **What makes you feel #Blessed?**]

If you're aware of #Blessed, you know it's a divisive Twitter trend (that's now leaked over onto Facebook). If you're not familiar with it, say a little prayer of gratitude. Mostly people who are expressing feelings of blessing indicate that they're receiving some sort of divine favor (and these days, it's not always from God - it could be the Universe, or karma or just good vibes). But more often than not, if someone says they're Blessed, they mean some higher power has given them something tangible - good weather, a parking space, a job, a family, and so on.

Now, we could spend a whole sermon talking about what Blessing actually means, how we've missed the boat on Blessedness. But I want to ask a slightly different question this morning. Because no one could deny that we live in a culture of material wealth.

It's been a few decades since Madonna declared that she was a Material Girl living in a Material world, but if anything, we're more material today than we were then. We're *all* Material girls, living in a material world. So I want to ask a very basic question:

What's all this stuff for?

If we assume all this stuff we call blessing is from God, then *why*? Why do we have it? Why did God give it to us?

I don't know that we ask that question much. If we think about it at all, we assume God gives us stuff because God wants us to be happy, or maybe as a reward. Or maybe it was some sort of divine clerical accident, a cosmic bank error in our favor, so we enjoy it while we have it.

But deep down, we know that's not true. We've seen enough celebrity overdoses and attempted suicides to know that more stuff doesn't make us more happy. That while Madonna might praise the virtues of a material world, if we're honest, we tend to agree with Notorious B.I.G. - mo money means mo problems.

So I ask again, What's the point of all this stuff?

There's a provocative answer in Jesus' teachings, in the thread of his stories we've been hearing for the last month. Jesus suggests that everything we have - call them blessings or gifts or resources or whatever you want - all of this is an invitation.

Jesus suggests that God gives us all this so that we can participate more fully in the world God is creating, the kingdom Jesus came to initiate.

The stuff in our lives isn't reward, it's invitation.

That's quite a thought, isn't it? That the things we have in our life, all we identify as blessing is God inviting us to a deeper, richer, fuller life than we realize?

At the same time, that's odd. The idea that the things that comprise our lives could be somehow an invitation. So what do I mean? How does Jesus imagine our blessings could be invitations?

If you've been here for the last month, you know we've been looking at stories Jesus told. When Jesus told people about God, about the life God was inviting them into, he used everyday examples from their world - slaves and masters, pearl merchants, shepherds. That can make it hard for us to hear Jesus' parables as he intended them, because we live in a different culture.

If Jesus had come today, what would his stories sound like? They would be stories about field trips to the zoo and Hollywood and flea markets and stock brokers. So in this series we call "You Had to Be There", we're reimagining the parables of Jesus as though he came today. We're following a book called *The First Time We Saw Him* by Matt Mikalatos.

The first few stories were from the book - we heard stories of how God views people who are far from him, people the Church often labels as "sinners". Jesus told a story about a shepherd who lost a sheep, which was reimagined as a teacher who lost a student on a field trip.

We heard a story about a father whose younger son took his inheritance and squandered it, then came crawling home, only to find his father welcoming him with open arms and throwing a party.

Last week, we met a stockbroker named Gary who was squandering his boss' time and money - until he got the pink slip.

Those two stories back-to-back raised some interesting questions for us. Because both the Prodigal, Frank, and Gary the stockbroker were squandering their resources. The Prodigal was wasting his father's inheritance. Gary was wasting his boss' resources.

Which is pointing at that question about Stuff we are asking today: because in these stories, the fact that they have stuff, resources, blessings, isn't the problem. In fact, the Father tells Frank's older brother to use his inheritance as he wishes. And Jesus tells us at the end of Gary's story that we ought to be at least as wise as Gary in how we use what we have.

But Jesus isn't done. He has one more story of squandered resources to tell us. And with this final story, Jesus begs an important question: What if *we're* the prodigals? We usually think of prodigals as "sinners", people who are far from God. But in this story, Jesus flips that perspective on its head and asks us rather directly, What are you doing with what you've been given?

The story today was reimagined by our friend and fellow pastor Adam Stevens. So sit back and listen to the story of a guy named Richard, who has been given quite a lot:

[Country Club/Golf Course] 'We are blessed,' Richard says to his wife. The gala is a favorite event, which in Richard's own words, 'couldn't be going for a better cause', as it raises \$50,000 every year for the Historical Society of the Hamptons.

'I can't wait to try the cooking class again this year', replies Victoria, 'you will come with me this time, won't you? I've heard they're doing a section on French hors d'oeuvres. I've always wanted to learn a flambé.'

'They teach flambe' techniques at the Historical Society?'

'Well, we're expanding our horizons. You can only churn butter so many times.'

‘I’m sure it’ll be great. Well worth our dinner tonight, which it looks like they are about to start serving. Lets head over to the clubhouse.’

‘Oh, good, I’m starving. Let me go get Kristina and James. They are sitting with us.’

As she pranced across the green, he watched the heel of her Stuart Weitzman’s dig into the bentgrass turf, leaving the tiniest impression, and reminding him of his tee time the next day. She’d sleep off her champagne, and he’d get up early and maybe get two rounds in, a nice break from his high-powered routine of political lobbying, which made this evening’s event far more valuable for him than it was for the Historical Society.

‘Oh’, she turned back towards him, the heel twisting a chunk of the putting surface loose, and leaving him feeling for his ball mark repair tool on his keychain, ‘and they are coming to church with us Sunday, too. Their minister is too longwinded, they said, and they just can’t take it anymore. I told them they would love Maple Bend.’

Great, he thought. He didn’t mind church so much. He’d practically built the place. And it hadn’t hurt his career, either. Most every politician went to church, keeping up appearances, playing the game. Richard wasn’t just playing the game though, he was sincere about his religious beliefs. He always considered himself an upstanding citizen. He didn’t cheat on his taxes or his wife, though he’d had plenty of opportunities for both. His three boys were proving to be fine young gentleman, doing well in school, athletic, scholarships to Ivy League schools well on their way. It wasn’t church he had a problem with, it’s just that Kristina and James McDonald were not his favorite people. He didn’t mind a gala dinner with them, but he wasn’t interested in their joining more of his circles. They were a little too ‘socially involved’. Sure they came to galas like this, but they also went places where ‘the need was real’, as they said. And they kept hinting at his getting involved, too. He was not interested. He was beginning to be concerned that his wife was a bit too intrigued by them, and might join their cause for the needy. He’d been on the *needy* side before, and vowed that he would never be there again. After one bankruptcy nearly ruined him, he committed to work even longer and harder and as a result he’d built for himself a substantial career in lobbying. He knew the right people, how to work them, and had become convinced that from now on his only direction was going to be up. He’d passed far too many people along the way whose ‘need was real’. *What they really needed was to get some work ethic*, he thought.

‘Great. I’m sure they will’, he said through his teeth.

‘Dinner was exquisite, wasn’t it?’ his wife said picking filet out of her teeth as they climbed into the rear seat of the Bentley. ‘And I simply adore harp music while I eat’. I think it actually makes the food taste even better’.

‘I think you’ve had too much champagne, honey. But the food was great.’

Their driver pulled the Bentley gently through the guarded gate of the Southampton Country Club, and out onto Shinnecock Drive, the four lane that would lead them through town to their own gated beachfront community. Richard often thought these gates were the barriers between true civilization and the rest of the world. While on the inside he was safe, secure, and himself. But outside the gate,

the change was abrupt. How the homeless managed to find their way into this community, he had no idea, but they sure knew which car windows they preferred to wash. It drove him crazy.

[Ambulance on the Street at Night] Leaving the country club they came to the red light before they noticed the commotion. A crowd of people were knelt down in the middle of their lane, blocking traffic, where a lone pair of ratty boots, toes pointed skyward could be seen between the people. Richard noticed the cardboard sign resting in the crosswalk next to the boots. WIL WRK 4 FOOD, it said. *I doubt it*, he thought.

‘Victoria, get back in the car!’ he shouted, lamenting she’d ever met the McDonalds. All of a sudden she wanted to help. Like she’d know the first thing to do for a homeless man keeled over in the street. As Richard raced out of the car to grab her before the onslaught of traffic started moving again at the green light, he noticed an officer on the scene.

‘Just stay here!’, Richard said to his wife, irritated that he was now standing outside of his Bentley on the busy street and not home resting for his tee time tomorrow.

‘Officer, can we get through?’

‘Yeah, I’ll move you around shortly. An ambulance is on its way, but it won’t matter. This guy is gone.’

‘What happened?’

‘Not sure, but looks like he got run over by that Hummer. Dives didn’t even see him comin.’

‘Dives?’

‘Thats what his panhandler buddies called him. Hardest working guy on the street. He’d do anything for a buck. Said if loose change hit the cement, he’d be the only one that dives for it. Name fits, I’d say. Probably what did him in too.’

‘Hm. Too bad’, Richard said, and compulsively took a quick enough glance to catch sight of the bright yellow shirt hanging loosely from the dead body. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he recognized him. It was the same shirt he saw every weekend when he pulled out of the plush country club, turning down the window wash. Men like that always irritated him, the constant bother of people hitting him up for cash. He just wanted to get out of one gated community and get home to another.

Which is exactly what he was thinking when he stepped around the corner of his Bentley, when he heard his wife’s voice for the final time, a blood-curdling scream, when his body was pummeled by the Mercedes speeding down Shinnecock, when everything went black.

[Bigger, Brighter Country Club] It didn’t stay black for long. In fact, in a moment everything went from black to blinding white. He instinctively covered his eyes with his forearm, but it didn’t stop the piercing headache he felt. As his eyes adjusted to the glare, he could finally make out some of his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was the gate. It looked just like the one at the Southhampton Country Club, except it was bigger and brighter. *Maybe I’m in Texas* he thought, and chuckled to

himself. But as soon as he laughed, he regretted it, when his chuckle turned to a wheezing cough, and he suddenly felt like his lungs had been shrunk to the size of a sandwich bag. It was like breathing through a coffee stirrer. At first he gasped for air, hoping that he'd be relieved, but it only made it worse. He frantically looked around for some help but there was none to be found. He moved briskly towards the giant gate and opened his mouth to call out, but no voice came. He turned in despair, and his back hit the wrought iron bars of the gate, his hands grabbing his throat, trying to massage breath into his lungs, as his body slowly slid to the ground, his chest heaving with pain, and still barely a wisp of air coming to him.

He had always been so healthy, never smoked, except a celebratory cigar from time to time on the golf course, never any sickness that he or his doctor couldn't manage with prescriptions, all well within his control of course, but this pain was inescapable. He could only manage the smallest of breaths and each one brought a tightness to his chest that made him feel like a circus performer lying beneath the crushing foot of an elephant that wasn't acting. A golfing buddy of his was asthmatic, but he couldn't imagine that difficulty being anything close to what he was experiencing now. A puff from an inhaler couldn't fix this. If he wasn't dead already, certainly he would be soon.

Suddenly he heard footsteps, turned to look through the gate, and knew immediately that the impact from the Mercedes had indeed been fatal, for when he turned he found himself face to face with a man who looked like no one he'd ever seen, but for some reason gave him the unmistakable impression of being a man he'd seen every weekend for decades, and whose name he had only recently come to know.

It was Dives.

Dives didn't say a word, but just stared, peacefully, almost mercifully at Richard, who continued to labor for breath. He was dressed to the hilt, in a full, double-breasted, cloud-white suit, and he looked good in it. Next to him, was another man, dressed casually, but looking just as nice, albeit slightly more comfortable in a pair of khaki's, a plain white v-neck t-shirt, and black and white oxfords, that looked identical to the golf shoes Richard had been planning to wear the following morning, were he still alive.

'Hi Richard. I'm Peter', said the man in the v-neck.

'You've got to be kidding me.' Richard whispered to himself.

'What do you mean?'

[Pearly Gate] 'Isn't this a little cliché? I've died, gone to heaven, and at the pearly gates a man named Peter is dressed like he's about to go golfing?'

'Its what you know.' Peter said.

'So its different for everybody? Does Dives like to golf too?'

'He does now, don't ya Dives?'

'Yessir', Dives said, with a quiet air of propriety.

‘So if this is Heaven, why can’t I breath’, Richard sputtered.

‘I never said this was Heaven, Richard, you did’, Peter replied.

‘Oh, I get it. Its heaven for you and Dives, but its hell for me, is that it?’

And with that he started choking again on his own breath. As his lungs heaved, and his chest surged violently, attempting to entice breath into it again, he clenched the bars of the gate in his fists.

‘Listen, Peter, or St. Peter, or whatever you want to be called, please. You have to help me. I can’t take it. There has got to be something over there that can help, an inhaler or some Vick’s, or something, anything. Send Dives. Send him to go get me something. I’ve got money. I’ll pay for it.

‘Richard, listen, you’ve already lived the good life. You had all you needed, and you spared no expense to suit your tastes. Dives here didn’t have any of that. His whole life was misery, a life he lived just a breath away from your luxury.’

Richard caught the pun and was not amused, though Peter kept going, as if he hadn’t meant it.

‘And now things have been...reversed. And of course, there is the matter of the gate.

Richard's hands closed around the bars of the gate, felt their impossible immutability. Despair consumed him.

‘Then, at least go tell my friends and family. Tell my brother and my wife. And my sons. Please tell my sons. Send Dives to tell my sons. When they see Dives they’ll know who he was, that he’d been hit by that Hummer. They’ll listen to a man who’d been hit by a Hummer. They’ll listen to a man who’d been dead.

‘Richard, there will be plenty of people in their lifetime to convince them of the way of Jesus. If they don’t listen to them, they won’t be convinced, even if a man comes back form the dead. They will have no less opportunity than you had.

Richard slowly inhaled the most minuscule amount of oxygen, wondering if thats even what its called,

‘Thats what I’m afraid of.’

Richard has allowed his wealth to become a trap: he had become convinced that everything he had was about his comfort, the life he was building for himself. And did you note that even in the "afterlife", he didn't want to go into where Peter and Dives were?

All he wanted was for Dives to come out to him, to serve him, to bring him some relief. All he wanted was to drag someone else into Hell with him.

In other words, Richard never got it. He never saw that having all that stuff wasn't bad in and of itself, but it caused him to ignore consistent, persistent suffering right outside his door.

He wasn't doing the work of God in this life, and he continued to ignore that work in the next life.

It's important to note that in this story, Jesus isn't really trying to teach us about the nature of Heaven and Hell. No one asked, Hey Jesus, What's it like when we die? No, just like all the other parables, Jesus is trying to talk to us about our relationships here.

He wants us to consider whether we might be Richards: are we the kinds of people who look at all the stuff we have and say, Man I'm blessed! Or do we ask, okay: how can I use what I have for God's kingdom?

Some of us might say, But I'm not rich... I don't have all that. I don't live a life of country clubs and caviar and Bentleys with drivers.

That's okay. I don't either. But as we discussed last week, you do have *something*. Some *things*. So do I. The question isn't, "How much do you have?" It's "What are you doing with what you've been given?"

Let me give you an example: When Amanda and I decided to get married, we spent a lot of time in prayer about what kind of marriage we were going to have. Why did God call us together? What about each other was going to help us follow Jesus better?

We agreed that we shared a passion for hospitality, for welcoming people into our home as friends, rather than strangers. We believe that is a deep part of why God called us together.

So every place we've lived since we got married, we've had a guest space. It's been a non-negotiable for us. And we've invested in making our guests spaces better - just after we moved here, we upgraded from a full-sized bed to a queen. And we got that bed *instead* of buying a new computer for our office.

Why? Because guests are our first priority.

And I hope you're thinking - you had to choose between a computer and a guest bed. That doesn't sound very spiritual.

You're right. It doesn't. But that's exactly the point. God has given us every kind of resource, not just spiritual resources. And God invites us to be about his business.

I've only been part of Catalyst for a short time, but I have already heard several stories of this radical generosity. I've heard about a hair stylist among us who gives kids free back-to-school haircuts. I've heard about a teen who wants to go to culinary school. His goal is to start a restaurant that funds a food truck that gives delicious, healthy meals to the homeless. Or even take our band, who uses their musical talents to create a beautiful, powerful worship experience for the rest of us.

Is there anything spiritual about haircuts? About cooking? About the countless hours of practice it takes to master an instrument?

Jesus says, Yes, there most definitely is. All of those are resources you've been given. And it matters how you use them.

What money did the Prodigal waste? His inheritance *from his father*. And what money did Gary the stockbroker waste? *The money his boss gave him*.

The implication stands in the story of Richard as well: He's rich, but everything he has is a gift from God. It's meant to be an invitation, and he squanders it. As surely as the Frank the Prodigal or Gary the Broker, Richard Rich is squandering. Wasting.

And Jesus warns: that way lies only death. What God has given us is an invitation to join in what God is doing. To work for justice. To seek the peace and flourishing of all peoples, even the Dives in our lives.

Don't be a Richard. Be as shrewd as Gary the Stockbroker and as generous as Roland the flea market specialist.

I want to close today with an examination. A chance for each of us to consider what God has given us. To consider, perhaps for the first time, that you're richer than you thought. That you have a lot to give, a lot to share. And that those gifts are actually *invitations* from God to join in God's restoration movement.

We're going to put some questions on the screen, and then you're invited to prayerfully consider them. When we're done, I'll close us in a prayer for all of us.

Examine

1. What are those things in your life that make you feel blessed?
2. What in the world around you strikes you as wrong?
3. This week, how can you use what you have been given to be an agent of restoration?

Discussion Guide

Peter told Richard that he had all he needed to know how to use his resources. He didn't need someone to rise from the dead to "prove" that Jesus' way is true. That's good news for us: we believe that Jesus' way is something we can understand and act out. In the Beaker Mini, you can find a discussion guide, which has several more scriptures listed. We specifically chose these scriptures because they give some guidelines about what Jesus' way looks like.

I want to invite you to spend some time with these scriptures this week. To reflect prayerfully on what you have been given and what it means to use those resources for God's kingdom. That's a fairly abstract idea, and I'm willing to be a lot of us have never explored that line of thinking. So spend some time there.