

Welcome

Good morning, everybody! My name is Ashley - and my name is JR - and we're a part of the teaching team here at Catalyst. Today we're going to be talking about blessings. In order to talk about that, we need to know what it means to be blessed. The word "blessed" actually pops up a lot in social media. More specifically, #Blessed pops up a lot in social media. This is a phrase that we often see on Facebook or Twitter when something happens to someone that they think is proof that God loves them or is happy with them for some reason AND it's something that they want to share with the world. Usually it has something to do with some material thing that you or someone you know worked really hard for and that you feel like God helped with in some way. Here are a couple of examples:

[#blessed images]

Now, some of those are pretty funny and they're easy to laugh at, but this begs the question: doesn't it feel like we're experiencing God's favor when legitimately good things happen? You got an unexpected promotion. You are the first person to go to college in your family. You got a car that you weren't able to afford in the past. Those kinds of things really do seem like God or the Universe or the Divine is smiling on us, favoring us. Blessing us. We want to say they make us blessed. Of course we don't like to think about the opposite... if things don't go our way, if we're not seeing "blessings" - then what does that mean? Am I doing something wrong, am I not a good person because God isn't giving me things or healthy relationships?

We can't have it both ways. If a life that's going well means God is blessing us, then a life that's not means God is cursing us. (And that's actually a really popular idea in religions around the world and throughout time. We even find it in our own tradition, as we'll see today).

But what if that's *not* what's going on? What if we can't use prosperity as a way to measure God's presence? What if we've got blessing all wrong?

Today, we're going to explore the possibility that blessing is about God's presence. We'll see that being #blessed isn't the quality of the stuff we have, but rather shown in our relationships with each other. So, we're going to begin this morning by worshipping our God, whose grace blesses us daily.

Message

This is the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate that the God who came to us at Christmas is not only for us, but for the whole world. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Church Words with Friends". We're going to be exploring some of those words Christians use that can be confusing. Maybe they're words like "Gospel" that are unique to Christianity. Or words like "grace" or "blessed" that pretty much everyone uses, but no one is exactly sure what they're supposed to mean. Our goal is to understand our faith better so that we can be better conversation partners with our friends and neighbors outside the Church.

And since friends are so nice, we're going to do two words each week. By learning these 'church words' together, we'll uncover new dimensions to our faith.

We began with God & Trinity, and discovered that when we say God is Trinity, we're saying God is most essentially self-giving love. God created us to join in giving ourselves in love to each other. Next, we talked about Gospel and Incarnation and saw that what makes Jesus worthy of our worship, what proves he is a god worth following, is that he demonstrates his love by becoming one of us, giving up his divine privileges and sacrificing himself for us.

Last week was all about the Cross. We explored the ideas of Wrath and Atonement, and we saw that the cross isn't about God taking a Xanax or punishing Jesus instead of us. Rather, it's about God loving us enough to save us from ourselves.

Today, we're beginning with that word Blessed. In some ways, this is the other side of the coin from last week - if some of us imagine God to be an angry, smiting deity we have to walk on eggshells around, then others of us imagine God as some sort of indulgent Santa Claus. You can't turn anywhere without people claiming to be blessed, and when you look at why they say they're blessed, well it's pretty easy to figure out how we measure blessing. We could lump it all together under the banner of 'prosperity'. New business venture, a financial windfall, success in a project, success of someone we love (like kids).

[Scripture Slide 1] That's understandable - the concept of blessing as something we measure by material prosperity is ancient. If we're going to get really technical (and you know we are!), then "Blessing" is a relational category. One of the most famous blessings in the whole Bible illustrates this. In Numbers 6, God gives Moses a blessing for the priests of Israel to use. Notice what the blessing entails:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons to bless the people of Israel with this special blessing: 'May the LORD bless you and protect you. May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.' -- Numbers 6:22-26

Blessing is about God's presence with us. Which raises the question, *how do we know if God is with us?* And here's the short mental leap to material prosperity. Again, we see this reflected in the Scriptures.

[Scripter Slide 2] Check out another of the most famous blessings in the Bible, from the end of Deuteronomy 28. This is from Moses, about 40 years after that previous blessing. This is right before God's people are going to settle the Promised Land. Listen to how blessing is measured here:

If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully keep all his commands that I am giving you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the world. You will experience all these blessings if you obey the LORD your God: Your towns and your fields will be blessed. Your children and your crops will be blessed. The offspring of your herds and flocks will be blessed. Your fruit baskets and breadboards will be blessed. Wherever you go and whatever you do, you will be blessed... -- Deuteronomy 28:1-6

It keeps going, but you get the idea. This is what we might call the “majority opinion” theology in the Old Testament. “Blessing” is revealed by material prosperity. You want to know if God is with you? Look at what you have.

So if you’re rich, God must be with you. If your crops are healthy (or, we might say, if your job is going well), God must be with you. Family healthy, wealthy and wise? God must be with you.

And that implies a strong corollary: if you’re poor, God isn’t with you. Bad crops or job turmoils? God isn’t with you. Rebellious kids, family strife, illness? God isn’t with you. And it’s an even shorter walk from “God isn’t with you” to “God is against you”. After all, what’s the opposite of blessing? Curse.

And even more, you can see in Deuteronomy how material prosperity is all tied to obedience to God. You want good stuff? You want to be healthy, wealthy and wise? Then obey God.

Blessing becomes a reward. That guy’s rich? He must have *earned it*. But that poor person? They’re cursed. They’re lazy and probably stupid. They don’t *deserve* wealth, otherwise they’d have it.

You can feel the transactional nature of our attitude toward material blessing, can’t you? That’s poison. Transactions are the enemies of relationships.

That’s why we called this perspective the “majority opinion” - other writers in the Old Testament recognize that blessing isn’t a transaction, that we can’t measure God’s presence by material prosperity. If you know the story of the book of Job - where a materially prosperous, godly man loses everything *even though he’s very godly* - then you know a really powerful example.

The story of Job points out what we know if we think about blessing for even a minute or two: we all know amazing, spiritual people who are poor or sick or suffering. And we all know some relatively awful, selfish people who prosper (and even call themselves #Blessed).

[Scripture Slide] That’s why, when we get to the New Testament and writings about Jesus, it’s so much easier to see this. Most of our Old Testament was written by cultural elites - the wealthy and educated, the literate. Royal scribes. You can imagine how much easier a time they have associating material prosperity with God’s presence. But the early Christians belonged to the bottom rungs of society. They were almost uniformly poor and oppressed. Even Jesus was considered something of a backwoods hillbilly - at least until people heard him preach.

Jesus begins his famous sermon on the mount with a list of people who are #Blessed, and let’s just say it’s not at all what people were used to.

**God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.**

God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.

God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.

God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. -- Matthew 5:1-11

It's not the wealthy but the poor who are blessed.

It's not the joyful but the mourning who are blessed.

It's not the proud but the humble. Not the conqueror, but the merciful. Not the full and powerful but the hungry and oppressed.

Jesus insists that our idea that blessing can be measured by material prosperity is completely wrong. We've got it upside down.

Which begs the question - is this a worthless idea that we need to abandon all together? If we have it wrong, should we move away from this language and learn new ways to talk about our world that are more specific? No, it's actually really powerful to continue to use this language, we've just got the idea upside down.

What Jesus did in His sermon on the mount is reframe the idea of blessing in our relationships with one another. Those who mourn will be comforted - by someone who cares enough for them to comfort them. Those whose hearts are pure will see God and begin a beautiful relationship with a wonderful creator. Those who work for peace will be called Children of God and be brought into a family of people.

When we reframe blessing as something that comes out of a relationship, then Jesus' ministry begins to make a lot more sense. God is actively present in our relationships and that's what produces the blessings. That's part of what makes us #Blessed.

What does God's presence in our relationships look like? God is present with us as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to us after Jesus ascends. God gives the Holy Spirit as a gracious gift. And, thanks to Galatians, we know the proof of the Holy Spirit in our lives:

"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." - Galatians 5:22-23

The Spirit's work in our lives produces those fruit. So you want a way to measure whether you're #blessed? What if, instead of looking at our material prosperity, we considered our *character*? And of course the only way to measure our character is in relationship: Love is

experienced between two people. Joy can only be shared in relationships. Patience is only practiced with other people.

So Blessing isn't about material possessions, but God's presence. That's good news, but it doesn't quite go far enough. After all, if, no matter what blessing is - prosperity or presence, as long as it's still tied to our ability to achieve, to obey, to be faithful, then it doesn't really matter.

Because none of us is perfect. None of us follows God perfectly. None of us would qualify for those blessings promised in Deuteronomy. So who cares *what* constitutes a blessing?

This is where our other word for today, Grace, comes in. Last year, when I did some social media posts about what words we find confusing, I was surprised to find that *grace* was the most common word people mentioned.

It turns out, we're really bad at grace. Which is too bad because grace is...

...

Amazing.

Sorry. I'm sorry. But it is!

The simplest, most straight-forward definition of grace is this: unmerited favor. (And that word 'favor'? It's connected to the Hebrew word for 'blessing'. 'Blessing' was who had favor.)

So what we mean when we say God is gracious is that *God gives us God's presence whether we deserve it or not*. God makes us part of God's own family. Not because we deserve it. Because God is good.

Jesus gives us grace by giving us the gift of his presence in our lives. It's free. Because Jesus is good. And the Holy Spirit, the gift of Jesus' presence is evidence of Jesus' grace to us. By giving us this gift, God has adopted us into God's family.

Here's how Paul says it in the letter to the Romans:

You have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. -- Romans 8:15-17

This blessing that shows up in our relationships is something that naturally comes out of our lives because of the presence of the Spirit. I.e. the fruits of the Spirit, like we talked about earlier.

You know what that means? That means that this is not something you create for yourself. You cannot create more blessing in your life, because it's actually naturally present within you. When we are most fully ourselves as God's children, this blessing flows out of who we are. For some of us, it's our joy. For example, I am blessed when I interact with Amanda because she always has the joy about her - a joy that I generally lack.

I've been blessed in the last couple of weeks by all the folks who have checked in on my brought food, hung out to keep me from going stir crazy.

I am blessed when I talk with and hang out with Debbie Reese because there is this patience that is just kind of around her. She doesn't ever seem rushed to me, even when she's stressed. That patience blesses me.

I am blessed when Boux and Shelly Bland are greeting. They have a warmth that exudes God's love.

I am blessed when I talk with Leroy and Elizabeth Sims because they both somehow make you feel so extremely cared for in the instant they see you.

I am blessed when I get to pray with Oscar and Rita Blanco. They have a deep faith and it comes through in how they pray.

I am blessed by getting to work behind the scenes with Pam and Tim Moriarty - they are constantly five steps ahead of me, fixing problems before I even knew they existed.

And we could go on and on...

It's not that any of these people *do* anything to make me or JR blessed. It's not that they strive to specifically bless people. It just pours out of them because of the grace afforded to them to be adopted into God's family and to have the presence of the Holy Spirit giving them the gifts to be apart of this family.

This family would not be the same without those people. It wouldn't be the same if we were missing any single one of you because the presence of the Holy Spirit makes you necessary to this family. Your mere presence - you being the most you you can be - is a blessing for all of us.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We come to the table to be present with Jesus as he is present with us.

1. How easy is it for me to receive God's grace?
2. Who has God placed in my life as a blessing?
3. How can I receive God's grace this week?

Assignment + Blessing

#Blessed - share how others are a blessing to you!