

Gesundheit? Or God Bless You?

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Matthew 5:1-10

I want to start by asking a question: what do you say to someone who sneezes? Do you say Gesundheit? Or do you say God bless you?

God bless you, or God bless, or bless you, as most of us know, is a common English expression, used to wish a person blessings in various situations, ESPECIALLY in response to a sneeze or as a benediction - like just before going out the door.

I found out that during the plague in the year 590 AD, Pope Gregory ordered unceasing prayer for divine intercession. Part of his command included that anyone who sneezed should be blessed immediately ("God bless you") since sneezing was often the first sign of the sickness. Actually blessing someone who sneezes dates further back than this. Legend says that people once held the belief that a person's soul could be thrown from their body when they sneezed - and if you have ever heard me sneeze, you might believe this to be true! (I once sneezed so hard that my desk chair rolled all the way across the chair mat.). They then thought that sneezing could allow the body to be open to "invasion" by the Devil or evil spirits. Somewhere in my childhood, I had heard that some people believed that the heart stops beating during a sneeze, so saying "God bless you" was to get the heart to start beating again. I'm not sure how legitimate it is to "bless" yourself, but if I'm alone, and there's no one hearing me sneeze, I'll mutter under my breath, "bless me."

There are other responses to sneezing, one which we've appropriated from the German, and that I've already mentioned - Gesundheit, which means "health." I always thought, and maybe you did too, that because there are 3 syllables in Gesundheit, that it corresponded to "God bless you." But no, it only means "health" or "health to you," again thinking that it would ward off sickness. And in some cultures, sneezing is actually a sign or symbol of good luck or of God's kindness.

But what I'm trying to illustrate is that sometimes we throw out "God bless you" or "bless you" almost mindlessly - without thinking about what we're actually saying. For example, I have "Blessings" as part of my automatic signature in my email - it goes out on every email I send. I don't have to think about it. And if you're friends with Gary and I on Facebook and your birthday pops up, I will send you "Happy Birthday Blessings!," again, out of habit.

Let me share what got me started on the topic of blessing and what it means to bless. It was at last year's Mayor's Prayer Breakfast, when the person assigned to pray for the Ashland area businesses and business owners said something which prompted me

to question what a blessing is really about. What this person said really bothered me; and I wish I had written it down, because now I can't remember it exactly, but it was something along the lines of 'let them prosper and their business grow,' etc., which in itself isn't wrong, but it struck me that it was said in such a way that made it sound like the blessing being asked for was only for monetary or profit gain. Maybe they didn't mean it that way, but that's what I heard. To me it had the shades of the "Prosperity Gospel" (health, wealth and success) or the prayer of Jabez made popular a few years ago, - enlarge my territory.... (from I Chronicles 4). Just as a side note, when I googled "Prosperity Gospel or Theology," I got some very interesting results. Like "a destructive greed sect," or "rooted in American occult tradition called New Thought," or this title - "5 Sure Signs that You've been Hoodwinked by the Prosperity Gospel."

Today I want to give a *brief* overview of bless and blessing and what "to bless" and being blessed should mean for Christ-followers. There are plenty of different ways to go about this, so I warn you that this might be part one of a multi-part sermon. And while this message isn't directly related to Pastor Keith's series on Revival, as I had settled on my topic for today before he had landed on his series, there may be a 'back-door' application to revival in here somewhere.

Let's look at Matthew 5, verses 1-10. I'm reading from the New Living Translation.

5 One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them.

<sup>3</sup> "God *blesses* those who are poor and realize their need for him,  
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

<sup>4</sup> God *blesses* those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> God *blesses* those who are humble,  
for they will inherit the whole earth.

<sup>6</sup> God *blesses* those who hunger and thirst for justice,  
for they will be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> God *blesses* those who are merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> God *blesses* those whose hearts are pure,  
for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> God *blesses* those who work for peace,  
for they will be called the children of God.

<sup>10</sup> God *blesses* those who are persecuted for doing right,  
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

This is the passage of Scripture that is most commonly referred to as “The Beatitudes” where you may be used to hearing, “Blessed” or “Bless-ed.” The KJV. I like how the New Living Translation puts the verb in the present tense - God blesses.

For you “word nerds” - as I am one ...beatitude - in the singular - means “supreme blessedness.” I used to think that they were the “Be attitudes” – be this and have this attitude to be blessed. But this is not a message on the Beatitudes, but rather on the word “bless” (verb) or “blessing” (noun).

Continuing with the word nerd theme - the Hebrew word most often used for bless is “*barak*” which is a verb which means “to kneel.” as one would kneel to receive a blessing. It also means to praise, congratulate, or salute. But another verb tense of the word is that it means to show respect, which is also typically translated as bless. Another related Hebrew word, *berakhah*, means gift or present. So it can mean to bring a gift to another while kneeling out of respect or to give something of value to another.

There are several words used in the NT Greek for bless and depending upon where and how the word is used in a sentence (verb, adjective or noun) determines its meaning. The verb tense of one of the Greek words for bless, *eulogeo* (from where we get the word eulogy), means to speak well of, to praise, to celebrate with praises. Without getting into the technical terms of Greek verb tenses, it can also mean “to invoke blessings upon a person,” “to consecrate a thing with solemn prayers, to ask God’s blessing on a thing.”

The Greek word used for blessed in this Matthew passage and others places in the New Testament is *makarioi* or the adjective *makarios*, which gives the meaning of blessed as the state of one who has become a partaker of God, to experience the fullness of God. I’m not really sure if the English translations of these words give the exact nuances that are meant in the original language - my husband, Gary, often says that he thinks that there are things lost in translation.

What does it mean when God blesses us?

Some, if not all of us typically think of God’s blessings as him giving us good things, such as health, family, possessions, prosperity, and we read in the Old Testament of God doing such things for his people. Not quite along the lines of the Prosperity Gospel, but we may be closer to this than we think.

But in Genesis 12:3, God also declares to Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” This blessing is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament. Ephesians 1:3 states that as believers, we are blessed with every spiritual blessing, and as a result we are called to be a source of blessing to the world.

This means that as Christ-followers, blessed with the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, we are to pass on this blessing to unbelievers.

I've already touched a little bit on the aspect of material blessings versus spiritual blessings. I recently came across an article about "what does it really mean to be blessed," which pretty much reinforces the premise of my message. Like me, the author did not find any hint of material prosperity or perfect circumstances in any New Testament reference to bless or blessing. On the contrary, "blessing is typically connected with either poverty and trial or the spiritual benefits of being joined by faith to Jesus." She went on to explain that "Scripture shows that a blessing is anything God gives that makes us fully satisfied in Him. Anything that draws us closer to Jesus...God's greatest blessing always rests in God himself. When we have that, we are truly blessed."

How many of you have heard the song, Blessings by Laura Story? This is the line that gets me every time...

'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops  
What if Your healing comes through tears  
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're  
near  
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise

Something that draws us closer to God...

What does it mean when we bless God?

Most of us realize that our blessings come from God, as we sang in "Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing," and our response is to "sing thy grace" and "call for songs of loudest praise."

As we sang in 10,000 Reasons, Bless the Lord O My Soul means that we are praising and exalting Him, worshipping Him. It is only when we have been blessed by God that we can bless Him in return. There are many Scripture references, particularly in the Psalms, where the writer "blesses" God. This means that we are giving Him the honor and respect that He deserves.

Blessing God is another thing that draws us closer to God.

So what does it mean when we bless others? Beyond a "God bless you" when they sneeze? Which could mean "I pray that God gives you good health."

Or do we mean that we hope that God blesses you with success and wealth? I don't know about you, but if I were God I wouldn't grant me unlimited riches #1 as I probably wouldn't be very wise with it but #2 I would probably come to think of it as something that came about through my own effort.

No, I would like to think that when I say "God bless you" it means that I pray that God would provide, not only for your material needs at that moment in time (not what you think you want), but more importantly, that God would grant you what would draw you closer – to Him; whatever it is that would lead you to living a life fully satisfied with Him.

Jeremiah 17:7 says "But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence.

The "Thought of the Day" on the front of the worship bulletin came from a devotional book that I have been going through called "Words on Worship" by Charles Billingsley. He says, "The blessed life is the life that delights in the Word of God and the things of God." He references Psalm 1:3, which parallels our OT passage in Jeremiah, where those who delight in the Lord are "like a tree planted by the rivers of water." These verses of blessing tells us that "our days will be fruitful and our lives will bring prosperity. ... but prosperity in the eyes of God is not the same that exists in the eyes of man...being fruitful does not mean being wealthy. Success doesn't always equate to riches."

This is what I pray and ask for God's blessing for all of us – that we live the blessed life as those who delight in God. Anything that draws us closer to Him.

I know, it may seem to you that we've only uncovered the tip of the iceberg in terms of bless and blessing. I may not have actually said what constitutes a blessing. Hopefully I've piqued your interest to explore this more, or like I said when I started, there may be another sermon or two on this topic. I know that sometimes the more I study something, more questions are raised than are answered.

I also told you I was going to somehow tie this into the Revival Series. Here's what I was thinking... as we go about our lives as Christ-followers, and we use the phrase, "God bless you" [or whatever phrase of Christian-ese that you might say off the top of your head to someone], can we be more "intentional" about how we use our words – mean what we say and say what we mean? Give a meaning to "God bless you." Not just reciting a list of people that we want God to bless, like in a child's bedtime prayer; although this in and of itself isn't bad.

Revival, in our personal lives, in the life of ABC, in the life of the Church in the world, means that we ought to take an intentional look - at what's working - or what's not working - a "re-view," if you will, to be more aware of how we live as Christ-followers.

There's power in words and the Holy Spirit works through our words in how we relate to and encourage each other and in how we influence those around us who need revived - or re-born - into God's saving grace. Maybe we even need to be more intentional in our "self-talk," as well.

I was going to close by trying to be clever, like faking a sneeze and seeing what response I might get. But here's what I'd like us to do. I want you to take a moment to think about what *you* will mean the next time you tell someone "God bless you."

Please stand. Now look around the room - I want to encourage you to pick out a person (or two) for you to say "God bless you" to - in the time between the end of the service and when the baptism starts. Maybe even go as far as saying what you are blessing them with. Or if you're not comfortable with that, do it sometime during the week - maybe with someone in your family or even for someone you may not know very well.

Pray with me....Lord, we thank you for this time that we can learn about what it means to bless, whether it is a blessing from you, a blessing from us To YOU, or us blessing others. Help us to be more aware of the power of our words. Help us to be mindful of our words. We thank you for the many ways that you do bless us, with the greatest blessing you've given us - the gift of new life through your Son, Jesus Christ. May we be more bold, more intentional about spreading this blessing, in sharing the Good News with those around us. And may we always remember to give you the honor due to you, as we bless Your name! Draw us closer to you. AMEN

Benediction

Prayer Corner/Baptism

Verse of Blessing From 2 Peter 1 (2-3)

May God give you more and more grace and peace as you grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord. By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence.