

## The Power of Blessing

**Ephesians 4:29-5:2**

**Romans 12:9-21**

This morning I would like to look at one of the great words and practices of the Bible, and of the people of God throughout history: the art and practice of blessing. The **power** of blessing—one person to another.

In our Bibles it sneaks by us. It's everywhere in there, but because the word "bless" has become so used, and so commonplace, it's easy for us to miss.

To the people in ancient times, and even in some cultures today still, the practice of pronouncing a blessing upon another person in the name of the Lord is powerful. So powerful that it had the potential, in many cases, to either determine, or alter, the course of a person's life.

How important was this practice of blessing?

In Gen.27 we have the story of Jacob and Esau. Younger brother Jacob, the deceiver, gets his father's blessing that was reserved for the older brother Esau. Esau is devastated. But it was binding; their father Isaac could not retract it. So, Jacob is blessed, Esau is not. What's done is done. That's powerful!

And a few chapters later (Gen.32), Jacob wrestles with an angel all night long and tells him, "I won't let you go until you bless me!" (Jacob is a blessing

hog!). As a result of that encounter, Jacob gets a new name: Israel, which means “the God-wrestler.” Or, “one who strives with God.” That’s what “Israel” means. Because he held on for that blessing. He wrestled with God for it, and prevailed. So the name Israel came about as a result of a request for a blessing.

In some places in the Old Testament priests are given specific instructions about how to bless people. And that’s part of a long history and tradition, which is why at the end of every worship service the pastor pronounces a blessing over the people, on behalf of God. The practice of blessing has been, and continues to be, that important.

But as we will see, it isn’t just the pastor or priest who does this. The practice of blessing one another in the name of the Lord is the calling of *all* of God’s people. There is tremendous power in this! In having blessing pronounced over you by someone, and in you blessing another person. We are the priesthood of all believers, right? That was Martin Luther’s great principle of the Reformation. And one of the chief responsibilities of priests is... to pronounce blessing.

The act of giving and receiving blessing is powerful. And I think, how many grown men and women walk around our society with a yearning in their soul

because they long for a father or a mother, or a father-figure or mother-figure or a community to bless them. To affirm them and attribute significance to them, so they know their worth and know that they belong. People crave this.

Story of the bulletin cover picture. Father Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, which is “the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. For over 30 years, we have stood as a beacon of hope in Los Angeles to provide training and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women, allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of our community.” Underground Ministries and our OPOP program were in many ways birthed from the ideas and mentorship that Chris Hoke received from Father Boyle and Homeboy Industries.

So this picture on the bulletin cover is Father Boyle giving a blessing to one of the homies that have found hope and new life om Jesus Christ. Father Boyle says these guys are flocking to him, whether on the street or coming into his office, asking for a blessing. There is a deep longing for affirmation and identity and belonging among gang members.

But this isn't just for special services or unusual situations, though. Blessing can happen in families; it can happen in small groups, in workplaces; it can

happen in a classroom, or in a restaurant. Reggie McNeal at restaurants: “Can I give you a blessing?” And then would leave a large tip!

This is such a great thing for God’s people to consider because our culture has no practice of blessing built into it—in fact we seem to be getting better at cursing rather than blessing! We don’t have significant rites of passage for kids, or cultural norms among adults which provide for a regular practice of pronouncing blessing. Which is why I think the church would do well to consider making blessing part of its culture and habits, because it’s such a rich part of the history and heritage of God’s people. There are cultures around the world that have blessing built in through rites of passage, and through rituals and norms of hospitality where the host will bless their guests as they invite people into their homes.

But in our dominant culture, individualism and competition govern our relationships, so we haven’t learned how to bless others. We know how to *compete against* each other. We know how to *distance ourselves* from each other, but we don’t know how to bless each other. Psychologist: in rugged individualist frontier days (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century), when we had conflict, we just kept moving west. Until we got to the west coast. Then, she says, we went

inward. When we couldn't migrate further west, we migrated inward, and began building houses that sheltered us from our neighbors rather than welcomed our neighbors. It's an interesting perspective.

From an early age we are subtly taught that our goal in life is to look out for ourselves and be successful. So much so that the word "blessing," in our culture, is usually only equated with personal prosperity or with things going well for us. Which can be true, and it's good to give thanks and glory to God for those times; but blessing means so much more than that.

The thought of blessing others is not practical. It's not built into the protestant work ethic manual. We are taught to look at others in terms of their usefulness, not in terms of their intrinsic value and worth as a human being. But the Biblical practice of blessing says: you have value and worth no matter what, because you are beloved by God. And, blessing says: you belong; you are part of community.

So again, the church would do well to recover the lost art of blessing; the power of blessing. When we bless, we are priests to each other and to the world, which is what we are called to be. In fact, the apostle Peter names us priests! 1 Peter 2:9: "you are a royal priesthood." Not just a priesthood but a *royal*

priesthood! We should be calling each other “your majesty”! Or “Royal Highness.” Because we are children of the King of the universe! And we are priests. As mentioned, one of the main responsibilities of priests is to pronounce blessing.

In Romans 12, the apostle Paul is describing how God’s people are to bless: 1. Each other; 2. Strangers, and 3. Enemies (esp. by extending hospitality)

What does it mean to bless someone? Whether it’s someone here, or in your family; or whether it’s a stranger, or even someone you don’t like. What does it mean to bless them? 3 things:

1. To bless someone is to say *yes* to a person’s belovedness. This is not the same as just being nice, or polite, or simply saying “God bless you” like we do after someone sneezes. This isn’t sentimental, slushy gushy emotion, but thoughtfully doing or saying something **true** to a person or about a person in God’s name. It becomes a “yes” to their belovedness. It speaks to a person’s value and worth in God’s sight. In business, the phrase “adding value” is often used when developing a product or building a company. Now, we can’t add value to another person—God has already declared each person’s value and worth—but we certain can help a person

become *aware* of their value; we can build them up and edify them in their understanding of it.

To bless is to say yes to their belovedness. Saying true things *about* them and *to* them based on what God says about them. Whether we like them or not. As we heard in the reading, “Bless those who are obnoxious to you; bless them, and do not curse them.”

2. To bless someone is to tell them who they are. To speak an identity into them or over them. Think of the older traditional baptism ceremonies where a child is actually given their name at baptism. They are told “this is who you are.” They are given an identity, in Jesus Christ, as a child of God, and given a name with meaning.

At a former church... family from Nigeria who asked to have their baby daughter baptized. At the baptism ceremony, the daughter was named “Ngozi,” which means “blessing.” She was told, at her baptism: you will be a blessing to others. That girl will carry that identity with her throughout her life. How powerful is that?!?

As part of this identity formation aspect of blessing, when we bless someone we call forth what's best in them; we see and affirm certain gifts or character traits, and we call them forth.

My friend and former mentor Mark Labberton tells the story of when, as a young adult, someone observed by the way he walked and by observing his mannerisms and the cadence of his speech that he had musical talent. He said, "What?!? How can you tell that I have music talent by the way I walk and how I talk and carry myself??" He'd never heard that before. The woman who spoke that to him (who happened to be a music instructor), sat him down at a piano and taught him a few basic scales and a simple song or two, which he picked up effortlessly. He took piano lessons and became a very good piano player. All because someone blessed him by observing something good in him and calling it forth.

To bless someone is to tell them who they are.

3. To bless is to speak well of someone. The New Testament word translated 'bless' is the word... (on screen) 'eulogy.' It means, "to speak well of." Eu as a prefix means something *good* ("euphoria" or "eucharist"). Logo means *word*. So, "good word." Or, to speak well of. And not at their funeral!

When Jesus, or the apostle Paul says “bless one another” or “bless those who persecute you...,” this is the word they use. Say a good word, speak well of them. Eulogize them. While they’re still alive! And when they’re in your presence. Don’t wait until someone has died to speak well of them! I’ve done over 200 memorial services and funerals over two and a half decades. Often, after the service, this type of comment is made, “I learned some new things about \_\_\_\_\_ today. It’s too bad we didn’t know those things when s/he was still alive.” Well, don’t wait!

To bless is to speak well of someone, to say a good word. Not only in their presence, but also in their absence. That’s why gossip and slander are so sharply condemned in Scripture. Because they have the equivalent force of cursing someone. It’s an un-blessing. Eph.4: only let words come out of your mouth that are useful for building up, to benefit those who hear. In other words, for blessing.

To summarize, to bless someone is to hope for and even invoke God’s best for them. And we don’t make our blessing conditional on whether or not we think they’ll receive it gladly, or if they will reciprocate. Paul says to “those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.” He didn’t say “if they apologize first” or

“if they say thank you” afterward. To bless is to hope for, and even invoke God’s best for another person.

Go out in joy and peace, and bless others:

1. Say yes to their belovedness, and their belonging-ness
2. Tell them who they are—help them gain a sense of identity, and call forth what is good in them
3. Speak well of others. Eulogize them, in their presence and in their absence. Speak God’s best for them.