

Receiving God's Blessings

March 1, 2009

Revelation is not just the last book of the Bible. Revelation is also a theological term that refers to those things that have been shown to us about God's kingdom. Some people falsely think the Bible is just full of a bunch of boring, obvious statements, but the Bible is, in fact, full of surprises. The way Jesus lived his life and his words taught us things about God that are far from obvious; we could not figure out these valuable lessons on our own. Jesus begins his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, with some strange ideas about what it means to be blessed. Listen now for God's Word that reveals to us true good news that we could not figure out on our own.

Matthew 5:1-11:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

The Greek word translated as blessing can also mean joyful or deeply happy. If I asked you which people are blessed, joyful, or deeply happy in our world, whom would you think of? What comes to my mind first are the healthy, the wealthy, and the powerful. There are some people it is tempting to be jealous of, since it seems like they have it all. Are they the people who are blessed? Doesn't our society tell us that the people with the biggest house and toys, the assertive, and the self-sufficient are the blessed?

Jesus instead tells us that the last people we would envy are blessed. When we are poor in spirit, meek, in mourning, and are hated and persecuted, then we are blessed by God. Huh? Does Jesus understand blessing? My first inclination is that I would rather have a root canal than receive those kinds of blessings.

Jesus tells us that basically two groups of people are blessed. The first group to receive God's blessings includes those who are undergoing suffering, especially suffering for the sake of their faith. Matthew 5 tells us that the poor in spirit, the mourners, and the persecuted for righteousness' sake are blessed. You may have the same question I did when I first read this text: who are the poor in spirit anyways? The poor in spirit are spiritual beggars, people who are at the end of our own resources. I look at poor in spirit as a positive term and believe all of us have been poor in spirit at some point in our lives.

A recent university study has observed that between 1968-2004, church attendance significantly increases during economic recessions.¹ The researchers suggest that the reason is any hardship makes us more likely to turn to God. When we have the illusion that we can solve all of our problems ourselves and falsely believe we are self-sufficient, we see less need for God. In those times when we know that we are vulnerable, we are more open to inviting God into our lives and seeking God's direction. When we are poor in spirit, we recognize the truth: that we are always spiritual beggars in need of God's love, support, and guidance.

Jesus tells us that those who are persecuted or reviled for their faith are also blessed. We are fortunate that we live in a country where we can freely practice our faith, but even today Christians throughout the world face political persecution simply for professing Christ as Lord and Savior. I believe that, if we take our faith seriously, we will face a different kind of persecution here in the United States. In our society, the greedy, the bullies, and those who exploit the weak try to get their way. They do not want to give up what they have; so if we, as Christians, stand up for what is right, we will likely be stepping on some toes. We need to expect that the bullies and the greedy will push back; we will face their resistance and their venom. Have you ever paid a personal price because you have taken a stand that you believed was the right thing, the Christian thing, to do? If so, you know what it is like to be blessed because people persecute or revile you on account of your faith. I'm also aware how, if I am not thinking carefully and really asking the Lord what God's will is, there are sometimes that I can be stubborn and the one standing in the way of what God is trying to do. In those times, I confess my sin and try to move forward and make sure I am not the one standing in the way of God's will the next time.

The first group that Jesus blesses includes those who suffer the consequences of living out their faith. Jesus tells us that the second group of people God blesses incorporates the idealists and dreamers. Those who are pure in heart, hunger and thirst for righteousness, and are peacemakers are blessed in Jesus' eyes. Jesus realizes that these idealists will often be frustrated. Despite the best efforts of peacemakers, nations still solve many of their disputes through violence, bloodshed, and war. Conflicts between individuals often are not reconciled and many people experience no peace within their own hearts. Jesus tells us that we are blessed when we still seek peace and justice, even though we know the road is long and the disappointments will be many. Jesus blesses us when we have the strength to stand on our faith, even in the fiery furnace.

One of the healthiest things that can happen to a ponderosa forest is to have a forest fire every five to twenty years. Without a regular fire, two conditions can ultimately lead to the destruction of the forest.

First, "a healthy ponderosa forest is made of widely spaced, fire-resistant trees," writes National Geographic's Michael Parfit. If the trees end up too close together, they

¹ This recent study by Texas State University was cited on *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central on February 23, 2009.

choke up the space and do not provide young ponderosa seedlings with enough room to grow.

Second, without a fire, dead wood, needles, and cones pile up into a thicker and thicker layer of combustible kindling on the forest floor. When a fire does come, as it eventually must, the fire burns hotter and deeper. Instead of a healthy fire that burns quick and low over the floor of the forest, the fire explodes to the crown of the trees. Such a big fire typically will destroy every tree in the forest and ruins the entire ecosystem because the charred soil is no longer able to absorb the rain. As odd as it seems, ponderosa forests need fire in order to be healthy and viable.²

Christians also benefit from fiery trials, even though they are painful. By going through the fire, God can help us grow into healthier, stronger Christians who are ready for the ups and downs of life.

I have been privileged, as your pastor, that you have shared your lives and your stories with me. Many people in this congregation have been through difficult challenges, including painful divorce, miscarriage of a child, struggling with cancer or another dreaded disease, the death of a child, the loss of a job, the loss of dreams, or struggling with the dark night of the soul. I have been inspired to see how many of you have worked positively through those hardships. Even though I know that we would not wish anyone to have to go through those kinds of painful experiences, we see how God is there to walk in front of, beside, and behind us to help get us through it. In those moments, we learn costly lessons about life: lessons that open our eyes and make us more thoughtful and compassionate. No one and nothing can take away the valuable lessons we have learned through life's trials.

As Christians, we have two frames of reference when we are going through struggles. First, we have the same evidence everyone else sees. At times, there is not much hope in what we can observe. After all, we live in a world where "war follows upon war, might makes right, and the innocent suffer everyday."³ If you listen to the so-called financial experts on television, it sounds like the recession is getting worse daily and that there is no hope in sight.

But I believe there is more than meets the eye: the church has a second frame of reference. As Christians, we see God at work in our lives and in the world. We have faith that God will overcome all that is not right with creation and will establish a time of peace and rejoicing in the great heavenly kingdom.

A pastor, who was speaking to a group of leaders from his church, went to the easel to prove a point. He turned to a clean page and put a black dot in the center. He asked them, "What do you see?" One person quickly replied, "I see the black dot." "Right, do you see anything else?" Everyone was completely silent. The minister then asked, "Is there anything else there?" The group replied that there was nothing else. The pastor observed that they missed the most important thing of all, the sheet of white

² Michael Parfit, "The Essential Element of Fire," *National Geographic*, September 1996, p. 118-123.

³ Tom Long, *Commentary on Matthew*, p. 47.

paper. In life, we are often distracted by the dot-like disappointments, and we forget the big picture, including the many blessings we have received from God.⁴

The Beatitudes help us open our eyes to see the sheet of white paper and gives us training to see God's invisible hand at work. Jesus is realistic that we will not be able to avoid the pain and ambiguity of this world, but if we receive God's blessings, we will be able to work our way through all that life brings our way. The good news is that our God is far stronger than all the misfortune we will face. In those moments when life is not much fun, when we call upon God's name, God will see us through to the other side. When we are weak, God is strong. Thanks be to God for the strange, unexpected blessings we experience when we recognize that we are poor in spirit and dependent upon our Lord. Amen!

⁴ This story appeared in the devotional guide *Our Daily Bread* on March 17, 2005.