
Blessed

Matthew 5:1-12

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, November 5, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

One word, one syllable. Spoken nine times by Jesus. Nine. That's a good sign that he's trying to get our attention. And all it takes for Jesus to change the world and our lives is one word. Do you remember when the centurion told Jesus, "just say the word and my servant will be healed" (Matt. 8:8)? One word from Jesus is all we need and there's one word that we all need to hear and embrace in our day. It's a pretty radical one when we live in a national context of cursing, criticism, and crime. That one word with one syllable, rolling off the tongue of Jesus is not "Duke" but "blessed." Jesus didn't have to use a hashtag to get our attention or to be relevant. He just says "blessed" repeatedly, nine times, because he knows sometimes we aren't listening too carefully. But this one word is his first word and key sermon theme in his sermon of the ages. "Blessed."

The Greek word for "blessed" (*makarios*) can be translated "fortunate" or "greatly honored" or even "happy." Jesus draws on his Jewish heritage when he says "happy." "Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding" (Prov. 3:13). "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong but walk in his ways" (Ps. 119:1-2). "The righteous walk in integrity—happy are the children who follow them!" (Pr. 20:7) "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night" (Ps. 1:1-2). Happy. Blessed.

Jesus isn't suggesting we go around and proclaim spiritual clichés like, "I'm blessed and highly favored" or "I'm too blessed to be stressed" or "Bless your heart" (we know that last one has other meanings!). Some have taken this one word of Jesus—"blessed"—and made into a hashtag fad. #Blessed. Some have called this hashtag the most annoying hashtag on Instagram because some people post pictures of elite parties in Beverly Hills or at 5-star beach resort vacations in the Turks and Caicos and it seems to be okay because they tweet #blessed. Maybe, as one writer notes, #blessed really means #bragging. #Blessed might be a way to hide one's boasting, ironically. The word "blessed" might be misused therefore stripped of its meaning. Religious people may tell others, "Have a blessed day." There's nothing wrong with that per se but if we overuse this one key word of Jesus, it may become so casual that it becomes as Ms. Jackson says, "Now it's just like, 'Strawberries are half-priced at Trader Joe's. I feel so blessed.'" Or, as a comedian once tweeted, "Caught a piece of bacon falling out of my sandwich right before it hit the ground, #blessed."

I don't think this is what Jesus meant with his nine beatitudes or blessings. Bacon wasn't on his mind; we were on his mind. God's first word over his people's lives is a blessing. "Blessed" comes first and it is repeated. It has priority. It signifies God's unmerited grace or blessing that is promised in the present and future to those who have need. "Blessed" is about God's astounding generosity. "Blessed" stresses God's favor and not our material blessing represented in a Louie Vuitton suit or a new BMW or that million-dollar research grant. Notice that there is no demand in his blessing, only statements of fact. This is very different from when Moses gave the law on Mount Sinai. For Jesus,

his statements are not imperatives or commands; rather, they are indicative. “Blessed are those...” And this one word of Jesus—“happy” or “blessed”—effects what it says, brings into being what it states. When Jesus says, “blessed,” in that moment, he blesses those he mentions. He does what he says. He confers the blessing in saying it.

This is why Jesus is depicted in wood at the top of this pulpit with his hand raised in a blessing. It is a primary image of who God is in Christ. Speaking and enacting blessing is what Jesus does and it’s so needed today. We need God’s blessing, with no strings attached, when what prevails before our eyes and in our ear buds is the noise of violence on a NYC bike path or at a LA elementary school. Violent acts of any kind are a denial of the other and a denial of God and God’s blessing, which is why Jesus teaches, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” Children of God don’t ram Home Depot rental trucks into people or airplanes into buildings or plant bombs on trains or shoot innocent bystanders in movie theaters. These actions have nothing to do with God but if our thinking is along these lines, it may indicate that we may not even believe that God wants to bless us.

We may be more prone to think that God causes our pain, our strokes, our cancer, our existential catastrophes. We may believe that somehow life is so full of struggle and hurt that it becomes more believable that this reality is due to God rather than any word of blessing. But if we believe God blesses unconditionally, then our pain is not proof that we aren’t blessed. Our circumstances do not circumscribe the blessing of God. The blessing occurs apart from anything we have done, earned, or deserve. Jesus just pronounces it—“blessed.” Some have a hard time believing this.

Duke Divinity professor Kate Bowler notes that the American prosperity gospel links being “blessed” with a culture of optimism and material prosperity, therefore, as one young preacher (Jimmy Swaggart) noted, “We should always walk with smiles on our faces, our heads held high, our shoulders squared, believing God.” We should always learn to see the sunny side of life. But it is a misnomer to call the beatitudes the “be happy attitudes.” The blessing of God has nothing to do with our attitude, whether positive or negative. It has everything to do with who God is. For example, “a person was in line behind a man at a grocery store who displayed a rather unhappy demeanor. The check-out clerk finished bagging his groceries and said, “Have a nice day.” The man then replied, “I’m sorry, but I have other plans.” Some days, the best or worst attitude in the world can’t keep misfortune or blessing at bay because it’s not about our attitude; it’s about God’s promise of blessing. Even if you don’t want God’s blessing, God is blessing!

This is so counter to our society which is more into cursing, name-calling, investigating, wiretapping, and prosecuting. Blessing doesn’t make it into headline news and maybe that’s appropriate since those blessed don’t either. In his book, *Whistling in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner, says, “it’s worth noting the ones [Jesus] did pick out [to bless].” “Not the spiritual giants,” “not the champions of faith,” “not the strong ones,” “not the ones who are righteous,” “not the winners of great victories over evil,” “not the totally pure,” “not the ones who have necessarily found peace in its fullness,” basically those “on the shabby side.” These are the ones to whom Jesus pronounces “blessed,” nine times. Not the well-educated, well-connected, well-liked, or well-groomed. He blesses, as pastor David Lose says, “All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at the bottom of the ladder people. Why? To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be -- with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious. This is

not where citizens of the ancient world look for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either.”

Blessed are the vulnerable, not the victorious. Happy are the losers of this world because you can have nothing and still have everything. The ethics of the kingdom of God, the ethics of Jesus, turn the world upside down, inside out, and turn our boastful hashtags into blessed, mournful ashes and a little piece of bread and some wine, signs of death, into the life-giving wedding supper of the Lamb where all the saints gather. This table may look like defeat—a broken body and poured out blood—yet this is where the blessing of Jesus flows for the life of the world. This is the feast of victory for our God. He who was persecuted, poor, pure, merciful, righteous, meek, and peace, extends a word of blessing to the same. But he does more than that, in this meal, he blesses us with his very presence. He gives himself to us that we might consume his virtues.

In the middle ages, when someone sneezed you said, "God bless you," fearing that they may have the plague. This phrase we hear so regularly developed historically as a way to ward off fear of evil, disease, and death. At this table, Jesus says, “God bless you.” “Blessed are those...” Blessed are you. May we never take that one word—“blessed” or “happy”—for granted or make it a virtual wonder sapped of meaning. Instead, may we use it to call forth the promised blessing of God on his people. God bless you.