

**“Blessings and Curses”**

“*Baruch atta Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam . . .*” With those ancient words, the prayers of God’s people from Moses to Jesus have arisen: “*Blessed are You, O Lord our God, king of the universe . . .*”

“Blessed . . .” — it’s a word that is used a lot in religious circles, including our own. In today’s Gospel, we hear the Lukan version of the Beatitudes; they all begin — in Greek: μακαριος (makarios); in Latin *beatus*. But we do not mean the same thing when we say “*Blessed are you who are poor . . .*” and when we say “*Blessed are You, O Lord . . .*” They are the same words: *baruch...makarios ... beatus ... blessed*. But they have wholly different perspectives.

When we say “***Blessed are you poor,***” we are saying that something is being added to the life of that person, or grouping of persons. Jesus is teaching in this beatitude, not that there is an inherent blessedness in being in poverty; he is saying that, for those who endure poverty, a blessed alternative yet awaits: “***yours is the kingdom of God.***”

When we say “Blessed are You, O Lord . . .” we cannot be thinking that we are adding anything to God — it is impossible to add anything to God. God is inherently blessed . . . the nature He possesses is one of blessedness. When we say “*Blessed are You, O Lord . . .*” we are simply acknowledging the truth about God — a revealed truth.

Indeed, the terms “Blessed” inform us that God IS blessed . . . we may BECOME blessed. All blessing originates in God. St. James tells us, “***Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.***” (1:17) We are blessed solely because God is, in Himself, blessed. The blessedness of God radiates from Him — mercy, love, grace, forgiveness, hope, joy, peace, justice — all of these are forms of God’s blessedness which He imparts to us.

Today, we focus on the concept of blessedness [and its opposite,

cursedness] remembering that God IS blessed. In Matthew’s presentation of the Sermon on the Mount, he records nine statements that begin “Blessed are . . .” Luke records only four. Did Matthew have a better memory? That’s unlikely. In fact, Luke had no memory of the Sermon at all; he wasn’t there. What Luke had were first-hand sources — people who were there and whose collective memories Luke tapped for all of his Gospel.

That fact that Luke record only four says that Luke had a purpose in recording these four only. He was very likely aware that there were other “Blesseds” that could have been included. He chose these four.

***“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”***

***“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”***

***“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”***

***“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”***

What did Luke understand Jesus to be saying? Why did he include these four and not, say, ***“Blessed are the peacemakers . . .”*** that is so prominent in Matthew? I think Luke limits himself to the four because he has four corresponding “Woes” that his sources have told him Jesus spoke. Matthew, I think, had his reasons not to include the “Woes” — but the attention of Luke, the historian, must have been caught by the inclusion of such words into this Rabbi’s sermon.

[Now, if you think that the Gospels were dictated to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John you are going to be troubled by that idea — but if you can accept that each Evangelist, guided by the Holy Spirit, nevertheless had their own style, and purpose, and point of view to present, then this will make sense.]

What we need to pursue, then, is why Luke thought the “Woes” should be included. The answer to that can be found in what is called the “suzerainty covenant form.” Those who have been through the Divine Drama and/or Crossways Bible studies will be familiar with the phrase

“suzerainty covenant;” those who have not encountered either of them will be the ones sitting there saying to yourself, “*The sudsy what?*” So let me give the Divine Drama alumni and alumna a refresher course while I clue you into what I talking about.

Scholars have unearthed a number of documents that define agreements between emperors and their subjects — covenants from the Assyrian, Babylonia, Hittite, and Persian empires. They all have basically the same format, in Six Chief Parts (see, even before there were Lutherans, there was Lutheran thinking):

Part 1 — Preamble [something like, “*I am king Muckamuck, conqueror of the mountains, most high exalted Poohbah, potentate supreme.*”] The Preamble tells us who is in charge.

Part 2 — Historical Prologue [here is recorded the wonderful ways the subject ruler who is known as a *suzerain*) has benefitted from being in covenant relationship with this emperor, for instance, “*I have secured your borders against the nasty-nasties, and brought peace and tranquility to your land,*” etc.] The Historical Prologue recounts the past deeds of the emperor.

Part 3 — Stipulations. Here the emperor sets forth what the suzerain is required to do [such as, “*You will present me with an annual stipend of ten thousand shekels of gold, one hundred sheep, two goats, and a coupon for a free Frosty at Wendy’s.*”] The stipulations may be quite extensive, going on and on about what is demanded, what is prohibited, and what is allowed (even in ancient times, lawyers had their ways).

Part 4 — Provisions for Storing and Re-reading the Covenant. The emperor did not want anyone to get away with the excuse that they lost the homework assignment or forgot what they were supposed to do. [So, for instance, the covenant would demand a public reading every six months.]

Part 5 — Witnesses. [Other vassals (suzerains) would be named as having witnessed this covenant, so no one could back out with a “*He said . . . He said*” excuse.]

Part 6 — Blessings and Curses. Here the covenant form would map out what exciting benefits awaited the suzerain who acted in good faith and, often in gory detail, what would happen to the suzerain if he did not live up to the stipulations [death was a frequent curse].

Now some of you are saying, “*So what if old emperors used a template for their treaty forms way back when?*” The “so what” comes in the recognition that the covenants that God sets forth in the Bible follow the same format. Listen carefully to Exodus chapter 20: “***I am the LORD your God, [Preamble] who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. [Historical Prologue] You shall have no other gods before me. . . [The first of ten Stipulations].***” Or examine the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans. For eleven chapters he describes who God is [Preamble] and all that God had done for His people Israel, for the Church, for the world, and for the Roman congregation in particular [Historical Prologue]. Chapter 12 begins, “***Therefore . . .***” and goes on to spell out the expectations of behavior that follow as a result.

This form literally permeates the texts of the Bible, showing up again and again, Part 1 here, part five there, part four in another place.

Luke has captured the words of Jesus that speak Part 6 — Blessings and Curses. Both are important. Somewhat like the importance of Law and Gospel. The grace of God cannot begin to be appreciated unless and until we appreciate the depth of our sinfulness. The love of God is only understood when we understand how unlovely we truly are. God’s embrace is real joy for us only when we have seen ourselves as the Lost Son in the foreign land bereft of options, hungry, alone, and futureless. Good news is good news only when it speaks to news that is so bad that it is hard to hear it at all.

So Jesus blesses us — or at least speaks the conditions of our being blessed.

***“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”*** Note, not ***“poor in spirit.”*** If all we had was Matthew’s version of these

beatitudes, we could excuse some of the mischief that has been done to this one. I have sat with fellow-pastors who excuse their and their congregants' apathy toward those in need by suggesting that Jesus expresses only concern for the spiritual well-being of people [these seem to be the same folks who tend to believe that the targets of the Church's ministry are disembodied "souls," as in "*How many souls do you have in your congregation?*" I want to say, "*I don't know. I've never seen a 'soul'. Have you?*"]

Luke's record will not allow to play fast and loose with Jesus' words. "***Blessed are you poor.***" Read the record of the prophets, from Elijah to Malachi to Jesus — God is on the side of the poor, works for the poor, has compassion for the poor, desires justice for the poor. This is what makes them "Blessed" — the Kingdom of God *is* theirs (not "will be")

***"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."*** Once again, Matthew "spiritualizes" the concept by adding "***hunger and thirst for righteousness.***" Now do not misunderstand: I am not suggesting that Luke was the accurate one and Matthew was making up words and sticking them in Jesus' mouth. Nor am I saying that we should ignore Matthew's account in favor of Luke's. I am saying that we should pay close attention to them both and let each one help us better understand the other.

Whether your hunger is spiritual or physical, God is ready to fill you. People without food for their bellies need food for their bellies; people who lack what God alone can give to them need what God alone can give to them. You and I are in a position to offer both to people. To be Christ's Body in the world demands that we do both.

***"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."*** Matthew records that "***you will be comforted.***" Luke helps us to see that this comfort is no wet blanket, or perfunctory attempts to let platitudes do what platitudes cannot begin to accomplish. God's comfort in our grief actually reduces us to guffaws.

I have been asked to officiate at close to two hundred funerals in my ministry. There is one common element that I have seen at just about every funeral I have been to: the weeping at the graveside (and before) gives way to laughter in the fellowship hall or similar venue at the funeral home or restaurant, or some family member's house. The laughter that comes is almost always in fond remembrance of some silly, or downright funny, story about the deceased — something she said or he did, a story the whole family knows and remembers. That to me is a blessed God-thing.

***“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”*** This one does appear to be an inherent blessing. There is no *“you shall get this”* or *“you already have that.”* To join Jesus in His suffering for the world is the greatest blessedness we can know, even if our joining Him is only for a short season or a minor inconvenience. Some are called to great suffering with Jesus — they make movies about those people. Others are called to lesser suffering.

Not all suffering is with Jesus . . . I'm not talking about the consequences of your stupid choices, or the results of your patent sinfulness. But there will come times (and I think it is “times” not just “a time”) when you will face a choice — one will benefit you, the other will bring distress, and you will have to choose which paths to take. Choose the path that Jesus walks.

The other side of the coin is that there are consequences to our choices.

***“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”*** Wealth brings its own set of problems. I know a lot of us would like to pray for an opportunity to experience those problems. I recently heard a comic state that he had no strong desire to be so wealthy that he could live in a mansion; what he wanted was a level of affluence where, if he was eating a bag of pistachios, and he came across a nut that was not opened, he could just toss it out. To that, I say, *“Yeah.”*

Be careful, because one of the problems that wealth brings, even at such a modest level, is self-sufficiency — you begin to think you don't need God. Another problem with wealth is that it tends to isolate us from others. Wealth must be protected, hidden, secured . . . fences, walls, vaults become the norm . . . people want to pry you from your money, they will trick you, lie to you, rob you blind. *“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,”* Shakespeare wrote. *“Weary is the head that must protect one's wealth.”* I just wrote that. Jesus says, *“When you put your trust and hope in what you have accumulated, that will be all the trust and hope you have.”*

***“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.”*** John Bradford was a early Reformer in England who was imprisoned in the Tower of London. On a day when other prisoners were being directed off to their executions, Bradford was heard to say: *“There, but for the grace of God, go I.”* (Some months later he would indeed go to his death by being burned at the stake.) What satiates your life? Watch out for it, Jesus warns, it will leave you hungry in the end. Popularity, friends, status, money, prestige, fame, glory — none have lasting sustenance. *“Sic transit gloria mundi.”* *“How quickly passes the glory of the world.”*

But you say, *“I seek none of that.”* Good! But I know this — you are addicted to something. I believe Gerald May was correct when he wrote, *“To be alive is to be addicted. and to be alive and addicted is to stand in need of grace.”* Caffeine, chocolate, late-night TV, web sites, food, belonging, not wanting to look foolish, hobbies, cleanliness, appearance, on and on the list can go of the things that rob us of the joy of knowing God.

Gerald May goes on: *“In an outpouring of love, God creates us and plants the seeds of ... desire [for Him] within us. Then, throughout our lives, God nourishes this desire, drawing us toward fulfillment of the two great commandments: ‘Thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself.’ If we could claim our longing for love as the true treasure of our hearts, we would, with God's grace, be able to live these*

*commandments. But something gets in the way. Not only are we unable to fulfill the commandments; we often even ignore our desire to do so. The longing at the center of our hearts repeatedly disappears from our awareness, and its energy is usurped by forces that are not at all loving. Our desires are captured, and we give ourselves over to things that, in our deepest honesty, we really do not want. There are times when each of us can easily identify with the words of the apostle Paul: ‘I do not understand my own behavior; I do not act as I mean to, but I do the things that I hate. Though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not; the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want—that is what I do.’”* (Addiction and Grace) Eat heartily of the wrong food, you can wind up malnourished, even if full.

***“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.”*** Okay, so maybe you’re not exactly laughing . . . but you’ve sort of blown off important things that cry out for your attention. How’s your prayer life? When did you last tell God a joke? Can you just sit in God’s presence, serene and happy? Or is something always tugging at your consciousness — some task, some unfulfilled promise, some expected behavior so there is no time for serious contemplation of what Jesus called *“the one thing needful”*? Eternity is such a long time to weep; maybe you want to give some time to serious faith now.

***“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”*** If you’re pleasing everyone, it may be because you are addicted to pleasing everyone. If somebody takes a dislike to something you’ve said or done, find out their objection and either swing them to see things your way or adapt. Only the pathological want to cause problems for others. But never change simply as a matter of expedience. Prayerfully consider where Jesus wants you to stand, and stand there. Jesus Himself gave us the model: ***“Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.”*** (John 5:19)

Blessings and Curses; they become for us like road maps. There are many



ways to go. Some routes will get you there quicker and more safely than others. Some routes are marked by previous travelers who can alert us to the pitfalls and rough places. Some ways are so difficult that we will become lost, and perhaps never attain our destination. In all of this, the clarion call seems to be: *“Pay attention. Watch Jesus, and then follow His lead.”*

The prophet Jeremiah gives us a wonderful image in today’s First Lesson: ***“Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”***

One way will bring disaster; another way will bring contentment. It’s your choice. Choose wisely.

Amen.