

"Privilege and Blessing" (29Jan17)  
Matt5:1-12; 1Cor1:18-31

Blessings and blessedness seem notoriously difficult to identify or attribute, since blessing can be so easy to claim at one moment but offer so little explanation when lacking.

The Bible can contribute to such confusion. As a couple examples, Psalm 127 describes having children as a blessing from God. But does that mean those of us without children lack divine blessedness? Proverbs 3 talks about the wise as blessed, but that not only fails to account for us stuck as idiots; maybe more importantly, it seems to contrast with 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians claiming our cross-obsessed foolishness. Psalm 137 is among the ugliest in the Bible; when held captive by the Babylonian Empire, it alleges that those are blessed who'd kill the enemies' babies. It's not only despicable, but the opposite of Jesus identifying peacemakers as blessed.

Along this ambiguous trend, we like to figure our wealth is a blessing, or a secure home or good job or caring friends, or any kind of victory as blessing. It spreads from there. A well-known social media meme over the past couple of years has even focused on this, as #blessed. No less than the *New York Times* has weighed in against what has turned from self-serving to just silly.\* That author reported her friends' internet claims that "God [had] recently blessed [them] with dazzling job promotions, coveted speaking gigs, the most wonderful fiancés ever, front row seats at Fashion Week...And, [not] limited to the little people, [God's] been known to bless Kanye West and Kim Kardashian with exotic getaways and expensive bottles of Champagne." In my own glimpse at Twitter this week, within a few

minutes those who'd been #blessed included students signing to play football at various schools, a guy who happened to push save before his laptop died, one whose coworker bought her a burrito after she forgot her wallet, and—I'm not kidding—a student who found answers to cheat on a test. #Blessed. That seems unlikely to be the sort of blessing God would be doling out. More, if God were indeed busy with that baloney, it would have to be a colossal waste not only of time but of divinity itself.

Yet this is so fully embraced by our culture that it's rare to diverge from this sense of blessing. It has become mostly a synonym for luck or being fortunate, though those happenstance, coincidental, rolling-the-dice types of terms seem less sacred or benevolent than claiming blessedness. While just as circumstantial, a claim to blessing manages to sound not only holier but more preferably likeable.

Again, the Bible isn't immune to the odd use. Quite often in its pages the term gets translated for some reason as "happy." Those of you who may still think of Twitter hashtags as pound signs may recall Robert Schuller's book about these Beatitudes called "The Be (Happy) Attitudes." But this is neither about your attitude nor about our usual feeling of happiness. Though Psalms would have it that "Happy are those who observe justice, happy those who avoid the way of the wicked, and happy who consider the poor," is there really any reason to suspect that paying attention to the immense and increasing levels of poverty around us could make you happier? In that instance, I'd be more likely to bank on society's claim that personal finances correlate with happiness.

But that's not where Jesus comes down. Indeed, his blessings appear like reversals. If we

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\* [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html?_r=1)

didn't know better, we could take them to be pitying, like a consolation prize, almost saying, "well, you didn't get what you really wanted, but at least you're blessed." One of the times is a week after Easter when Thomas gets to put his fingers into the nail marks in Jesus' hands. Jesus replies, "yeah, but blessed are those who haven't seen but come to believe." That always prompts me to want to respond, "thanks, Jesus, but if it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon get to touch and see."

Yet there's plenty of biblical precedent for paradoxical blessedness. Psalms talk about those taking refuge in God as blessed (where we might ask if would be better to be secure and not need a refuge). Those whose transgressions are forgiven are blessed (again, we might imagine it's better not to have done wrong in the first place). We'd be slow to echo the Psalms' sentiment that people are blessed when they've been disciplined by God. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter calls those blessed who suffer for doing what is right, when we'd prefer to avoid suffering at all costs. Revelation talks a lot about blessing in the face of adversity, calling martyrs with blood on their robes blessed and even the dead are blessed. The probably foremost biblical etymologist notices that the Bible's definitive use of blessing is as a "reversal of customary evaluations."<sup>11</sup> So it's not just a consolation prize, but truly upending our estimations.

It doesn't take much to appeal to our worst instincts, so when we would cherish most the good life, the new car, the fancy house, the full belly, attractive looks, the smiling family, an applauded career, the ease of schedule, releasing of stress, beautiful surroundings, and the right answers for the tests, then almost all of the favorable comparisons we typically attribute as blessings are reversed in God's appraisal and in these words from Jesus. Blessed are the

poor? Blessed are those low in spirit, without much holiness, the *un*-happy!? Blessed are those who mourn? The meek? The hungry? Those yearning for and need justice? The soft-hearted? The ones who labor for reconciliation: the winners are those who don't try to win? Or worse, the losers: the persecuted and reviled and lied about?

This list has a bad set of roles, with some pretty undesirable circumstances that Jesus lays out for us in his first sermon. And he's not saying these are worthwhile eventually, that it seems rotten now but pays off in the long run. He's observing the reality of what it's like to be his follower and to live into this spreading heaven-ish empire. Each could begin, "You'll know you're following Jesus if..."

These blessings sure aren't demonstrable happiness, but result from the trust and conviction of faith, or more from your inescapable connection to God's redeeming and saving work. You are brought in to experience this firsthand, unexpectedly making it (as I translated the term) a "privilege." The best thing about blessing from God is that it doesn't just validate your stature or what you already thought of yourself, but God's blessing arrives amid difficulty and disappointment, when you need it, when all seems lost and you're wondering why you should keep trying to be true in doing what is right.

With this, we could refer to it either as mere coincidence or as a "blessing" that the lectionary gives us the intensely unflinching reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, proclaiming our center in Christ crucified, a scandal and moronic (in the original Greek). "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are."

We need this word right now. Your blessing

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<sup>11</sup> Kittel, vol4, p368

is the result of following a crucified criminal, of being incorporated into this crucified and resurrected body of his that persistently takes on flesh as the church in the world, striving for his purposes, of thus being chosen by God, and that means you are blessed, if you can believe all that.

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain and gathered his followers around him<sup>1</sup>, and he opened his mouth teaching and saying to them,

"Privileged<sup>2</sup> are the dispirited<sup>3</sup>, because they are part of heaven-ish empire<sup>4</sup>.

"Privileged are the saddened, because they are to be encouraged.

"Privileged are the nonviolent<sup>5</sup>, because they'll<sup>6</sup> control this world.<sup>7</sup>

"Privileged are those hungering and thirsting for justice<sup>8</sup>, because their appetites are to be quenched.

"Privileged are the helpers, because they'll be helped<sup>9</sup>.

"Privileged are those with clean hearts<sup>10</sup>, because they'll recognize God.

"Privileged are the peacemakers, because they are to be called son of God and daughter of God<sup>11</sup>.

"Privileged are those hunted<sup>12</sup> for justice, because they are part of heaven-ish empire.

"You're privileged when you're insulted and hunted and they give 'alternative facts'<sup>13</sup> about you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because that's earning the heaven-ish wages<sup>14</sup>, just as that's how they hunted the prophets before you."

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<sup>1</sup> skipping sit to teach, for modern context

<sup>2</sup> see Kittel v4p365, trying for familiar modern term

<sup>3</sup> depressed? down-hearted? not-very-spiritual?

<sup>4</sup> term from last week's sermon

<sup>5</sup> see [www.GirardianLectionary.net](http://www.GirardianLectionary.net)

<sup>6</sup> "are to\they'll" emphasizing future passive

<sup>7</sup> heir → responsibility, share of, take possession of; ghn as land, nation, earth (non-heaven)

<sup>8</sup> more familiar than "righteousness"

<sup>9</sup> trying for paired terms around e<sup>l</sup>ehmon (gracious\graced)

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 51:10

<sup>11</sup> baptismal calling

<sup>12</sup> more active of "sought\chased" and more familiar than

"persecuted\oppressed"

<sup>13</sup> term currently in news from Trump, for "falsely say bad stuff"

<sup>14</sup> not heavenly reversal, but active suffering for acting godly