

Blessings of the King

Matthew 5:1-12

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I am blessed. I cannot think of a more fitting way to begin a sermon on the Beatitudes than simply to say, “I am blessed.” In the Beatitudes, the series of nine blessings that Jesus pronounces in Matthew 5:1-12, the word “blessed” is used in every single one of the pronouncements. I cannot think of a more fitting way to begin a sermon on the Beatitudes than simply to say, “I am blessed.”

Now as I try to explain to you exactly how I am blessed, well, it probably won't be anything of the sort of blessing you might typically expect to hear in a sermon about blessing. But just because I am going to tell you about a blessing that you probably would never guess does not mean all the other blessings you might expect me to talk about do not matter. They do. That is the great thing about a sermon on blessings...the sermon could go in any of a hundred different directions, and I am sure they would all be of great value. My blessing just happened to come in the form of something I never expected. You see, I finally understand a little bit about a story in the bible that has always puzzled me. The story is found in Numbers chapter 22. It is the story of a man named Balaam.

The story takes place after the Exodus when the Israelites were wandering for forty long years in the wilderness. The nation of Moab saw this huge mass of people coming their way and they were threatened. They were afraid. So, the king of Moab, a king named Balak, sent messengers to find this man named Balaam who apparently had a reputation of being able to bring blessings and curses to pass. The king, Balak, sent a message to Balaam to come and place a curse on the Israelites, to keep them from intruding on the nation of Moab. When Balaam receives this request, to curse the Israelites, he tells those who made the request to hold on a minute while he checks with God to find out if he should go along and curse the Israelites. God's answer to Balaam is clear. “Do not go with them. You must not put a curse (on the Israelites) because they are blessed.” (Numbers 22:12)

The story of Balaam takes up three whole chapters in the Book of Numbers, 91 verses in total. It has twists and turns and for many years it has eluded the grasp of my understanding. But now, I think I can finally say I understand

something about what this story is trying to convey. Balaam ends up going to meet King Balak. God said don't curse Israel, they are blessed. These people are blessed. Balaam goes to meet with the king who wants to curse Israel. If you know anything about the story of Balaam, you almost never hear the story simply referred to as the story of Balaam. Without fail, the story is always referred to as Balaam and his donkey. Well, that is not exactly true, because in the King James Version of the Bible, the donkey is not referred to as a donkey. King James permitted the use of a certain word that is not said these days in polite company, but the word King James uses means the same thing as a donkey, so we will part from the King James translation and speak of Balaam and his donkey. I'll give you a hint about the word the King James uses by telling you when I use the word donkey, I am tempted to put an asterisk by it. (Wink, wink)

The donkey plays a key role in what is a memorable story. Balaam sets course to meet King Balak. Unbeknownst to Balaam, the Lord is angry that Balaam is going to curse a people that God intends to bless. An angel of the Lord stands in the way of Balaam and the donkey, with a sword drawn. The donkey sees the angel and veers off the road into a field. Balaam, now angry himself, beats the donkey to get her back on the road. Their journey takes them down a narrow path and the donkey again sees the angel of the Lord. This time the donkey presses against a wall to get out of the way, and Balaam's foot is crushed. He beats the donkey again. Undaunted, Balaam continues. When the donkey sees the angel of the Lord for the third time, she simply lies down and won't budge. Balaam, in his anger again beats the donkey. During this third incident of receiving unjust punishment, the Lord opens the mouth of the donkey, and the donkey says to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" After some back and forth, the Lord finally opens Balaam's eyes and he sees the angel of the Lord. At that point Balaam recognizes why the donkey has been doing what the donkey has been doing.

Anyway, I guess I was about as blind as Balaam, because it wasn't until this time in reading the story of Balaam and his donkey, in relation to the Beatitudes of Jesus, that I finally came to understand at least one part of this puzzling story. Here is my great revelation, my eye-opening understanding. **"When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless."** There is nothing anyone can do to stop it. Balaam went on a journey to find out if maybe he could give a curse upon the people of God, but the Lord, through that amazing

donkey, thwarted Balaam every step of the way. “When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.” And there is nothing anyone can do to stop it.

Question: Does it take 91 verses of a confusing and meandering tale that includes a talking donkey for us to understand something as simple and direct as this statement, “When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless”?

Question: Does it take 91 verses? Answer: No.

It takes **more** than 91 verses. It takes way more than 91 verses for us to understand something as simple and direct as this statement: “When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.” In fact, apparently it takes pretty much the whole bible for us to come to understand something as simple and direct as this statement: “When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.”

- It definitely takes all of the creation story, that dramatic depiction that we find in the opening pages of the bible. For six days God is busy creating the heavens and the earth, a breath-taking display of God’s power to take the chaos of the cosmos and order things day after day until all things are not only good, they are very good. Then, when everything has been created, God rests. God rests on the seventh day. After all the goodness and majesty and marvel of this whole world and universe has been created, we are told that God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. All the activity of spinning planets and roaring waters, the spectacular birth of life and the blossoming and blooming of plants and trees, God’s blessing is the final word in the creation story. When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.
- God’s call to that old man named Abram to go from his country and his people and his father’s household to the land the Lord will show him begins with a blessing. God’s special relationship with Abram, which will lead to his special relationship with the nation of Israel, which one day will expand to include all the nations of this earth, begins with a blessing. What follows are a series of events that threaten to block that blessing, events that cover thousands of years, but the witness of the bible, time and time again, in dire situations, in situations that seem hopeless, with people who become distraught and discouraged, the witness throughout the pages of the bible is this: “When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.” It wouldn’t be right to preach a

sermon about blessing without hearing again the very words of blessing God used as he set Abram on his journey of faith. “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Those last words are crucial for our understanding of what God promises to do. “All peoples on earth will be blessed.” No, 91 verses are not enough for us to learn the simple lesson that when the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.

- Even when the psalmist sings a song of blessing to the Lord, it is immediately obvious that the psalmist is giving thanks for the blessings that have come from the Lord. Psalm 103...Psalm 103...what a beautiful reflection on blessing. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, Bless his holy name.” All that is within me. The psalmist blesses the Lord in the opening verse and then continues, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits...” In other words, the psalmist is going to bless the Lord by remembering all the blessings that have come from the Lord. “...forget not all his benefits.” Have you ever tried to remember all the Lord’s benefits? To remember all the Lord’s benefits is exhausting because we can never exhaust the list of God’s blessings...it is exhausting to remember all the Lord’s blessings, but it is exhausting in a rich and wonderful way. If you love the waves of the ocean, as soon as you thank God for one wave, another rolls in. If you love a sunrise, well, tomorrow it will be here again...with a sunset thrown in for good measure. When flowers bloom, when trees blossom, when fruit ripens, when leaves turn golden or burst into fiery colors, when birds sing, when fresh running brooks make gurgling sounds as the water splashes over the rocks, when stars twinkle and the moon waxes and wanes...forget not all his benefits.
- The psalmist makes an important move in praising God for the many benefits of God’s blessings. The psalmist places God’s benefits in historical context, in the real life actions of our real life God in the real life history of the people of God, the nation of Israel. “He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel.” Moses is the Exodus, God’s great act of deliverance from slavery, provision of the Law, and guidance in the wilderness. Those real life actions of our real life God serve to bind the people to their God and to their salvation history.

- And then the psalmist turns to the blessing of God’s mercy. “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:8-12) With the images of God’s love being as high as the heavens and God casting our sins as far from us as the east is from the west, we enter the realm of the infinite. God’s blessings are infinite. How high is heaven? How far is the east from the west? God’s love and mercy are unbounded. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. Psalm 103 is yet one more telling tribute to the simple and direct statement, “When the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.” And there is nothing anyone can do to stop it.

In light of the infinite nature of God’s blessings, blessings of creation, blessings of God’s steadfast love, blessings of the covenant that not only called Abraham but set Israel free from their bondage in Egypt, blessings of mercy and forgiveness and grace, it is tempting to ask why Jesus would begin his epic sermon in Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount, with words of blessing. Hasn’t God made it abundantly clear that his blessing is everywhere and for everyone and for all time and for all people? Why do we need Jesus now to tell us again about God’s blessing?

Could it be Jesus understood that even though God’s blessing had been poured out in countless ways at countless times to countless people, there were still some of God’s children who had not experienced God’s blessing? And Jesus wanted to make sure every child of God received God’s blessing. Like one painting a vast and huge masterpiece on a massive canvas, God had been blessing creation with broad strokes of the brush. Dripping with paint the brush covered creation...let there be light, let the waters be gathered together, let the waters teem with creatures, let the land be filled...big hug strokes of the brush. The brush again swiped a mighty stroke as Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and his twelve sons discovered the blessing of belonging to God. A wide swath was drenched in the awesome deliverance of the Exodus. Stroke, stroke, stroke, blessing after blessing after blessing, until the canvas was saturated with God’s goodness and grace, every crack and crevice and corner covered in God’s blessings.

Or so it seemed to the untrained eye. But when Jesus came, the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name, he noticed some had been passed over or missed, excluded or cut off. So many had received so much in terms of blessing, but still there were some who had not been touched. And Jesus saw those, Jesus saw those who needed blessing and had yet to receive it, Jesus saw those whose need cried out, Jesus saw ones who were the least and the last and the lost, the weary and heavy laden, and so Jesus took out not a big industrial type brush, he took out a brush with a fine tip, and one by one he touched up those who had missed out.

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 because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Somehow in all God's blessings, these ones had missed out. Jesus spoke directly to them. If you have received the blessing of the big brush, if you have been drenched in God's goodness and grace, if you are overflowing with joy because of your blessings, then go right ahead and pray with the psalmist, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me. Bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all his benefits."

But if you find yourself among the poor in spirit, among those who mourn, among those who are meek and lowly, among those whose hunger and thirst for righteousness and peacemaking have left you longing for God's blessing, if you have suffered the pain of persecution and the struggle of being pure and merciful in a world that is not, don't give up. Don't despair. Jesus has come with a fine brush, and he pays perfect attention to every detail. With his gentle touch he promises to bless you, in your sadness, in your sorrow, in your suffering, and in your tearful sighing. Jesus comes to us in our lowest and most desperate moments to bless us, because he loves us. And when the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless.

In the Sermon on the Mount his blessing comes in words. But know also that his blessing is more than words. The God who said as far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your sin from you, the God who says that also say to watch the arms of Jesus as he speaks his words. Watch his arms stretch out as he blesses the least, the last, and the lost. Watch his arms stretch out, as far as the east is from the west, as he blesses you and as he blesses me.

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Watch him as his arms stretch and stretch and stretch and stretch until they are spread wide open on the cross of Calvary. Know that his arms are arms of love, spread wide open for you and for me, for all who are poor in spirit, opened wide, spread wide open to signify God's love which reaches as far as the east is from the west, and that there is nowhere we can go in all God's creation where we are ever separated from the love God has given us in Christ Jesus. Know this for certain, no matter where you have been, and no matter where you are now, Jesus has come to bless you, and to fill you with God's goodness and God's grace. Jesus has come to bless you because Jesus loves you. It pretty much takes this whole book for us to realize the simple and sweet truth, that when the Lord is gonna bless, the Lord is gonna bless. Friends, there is nothing in all creation that is gonna keep God from blessing his precious children. Even when his enemies nailed God's beloved Son to the cross, convinced that if they put him to death they would stamp out his influence, all they did was allow God to show us in the most touching and tender way just how much God really does love us, every single one of us. That is something I hope we can all latch onto and hold close to our hearts. "When God is gonna bless, God is gonna bless." And there is nothing that can stand in God's way.