

BLESSED

In 1967 Charles Murray was a student at the University of Cincinnati and was preparing for the summer Olympics in high diving. He was not a Christian and had never gone to church. One day he met someone in a class that was a Christian. His new friend shared with him that God loved him and wanted to have a relationship with Him. He honestly was quite skeptical but interested. So over the semester, he talked this friend about God's love and how much he mattered to God. One night he decided to call his friend up. He said, "Tell me again those verses in the Bible that says God cares about me." And his friend shared those verses.

After he hung up he decided to go over to the school pool to do some practice diving. Because he was preparing for the Olympics, he had special privileges and he could use the pool even when it was closed. At the University of Cincinnati, it is an indoor pool and of course the lights were off because it was closed but it has a glass ceiling and there was a full moon that night so he could see his way to the diving board. He climbed up the top of the diving platform, turned around to do his first dive backwards and stretched out his arms. When he did that the moonlight coming through the ceiling shown his shadow on the wall and formed the shape of a cross. He looked at that and for the first time Charlie felt God's love. He realized that Christ had died for him. That is how much God loved him. And in that moment on the twenty-plus feet diving platform, he sat down and opened his life to God. He said, "Jesus Christ, come into my life and make a difference in my life," and he became a follower right there twenty feet up. He was sitting there in the dark when, about five minutes later, a janitor walked in and suddenly flipped on the light. It startled Charles. He got up and as he looked down he saw that the pool had been emptied for repairs.

Charles Murray did not deserve heaven. He could have ignored the shadow of the cross and jumped into eternal separation from God. Instead he found grace. He found God's blessing. Likewise none of us deserve heaven. The fact that anyone is saved is a miracle of grace. We are objects of blessing.

We are starting a new series today called Blessed. The year 2020 has been a tough one so far. As I was praying about what to speak about this summer I asked God what He thought the people of BBC needed to hear. I felt like God was just saying to me "just tell them that they are blessed." So that is what we are going to do. For the next 4 weeks we are going to be remembering the many ways that God has blessed us in our lives.

Just before the pandemic hit we sang a new song at the church for the first time called The Blessing. It is a song based on the priestly prayer found in Num 6;

Num 6:24-26 The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.

During the pandemic, this song has been taken and sung over many different nations and cities all around the world. It seems to have been spreading faster than the coronavirus itself. At the heart of this song and at the heart of this movement is a simple belief, that God wants to bless his people. That, as believers in Jesus Christ, we are truly blessed.

So let me ask you a simple question this morning, do you feel blessed right now? Do we really remember and understand all the ways that God has blessed us? Let's read this passage from the book of Ephesians together;

Ephesians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will -- 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. 11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory.

This scripture says 3 things about God's blessing;

1. Selected (vs. 3-6) - past

God has truly blessed us. His blessings to us started long before we were even born. Even long before the creation of the world. He chose to bless us from before the beginning of time. I like the way the Message version translates these verses;

Eph 1:3-5 (Message) How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. 4 Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. 5 Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!)

God has blessed you. Long before you were even born, God loved you and chose to have a relationship with you. Even before the world was created, God had a plan for your life.

What does it mean that God chose us? You cannot discuss this verse without addressing what it means that God 'predestined' us. What is predestination? You do not have to study theology long before you find the contradiction between predestination (which means that God chooses who will be saved) with free will (that we choose whether to be saved or not). The bible teaches both.

When I was in seminary, I remember taking a class in Theology in my first year. The professor got up and for the entire class taught what the bible had to say about predestination. By the end of that class I remember thinking to myself "wow, he really believes in predestination!" I guess we all know where he is leaning in terms of predestination vs free will. The next day he spent the entire class teaching what the bible says about free will. At the end of the class one student got up and said "I do not understand, which is it?" I will always remember his words. He said "It's both!"

In other words, both are true and both are essential. It is like two poles with a wire hanging between them upon which all theology hangs. Cut either one down and everything else slides off. It is like a railway track, running together always the same distance away.

It is like a door that says knock and the door will be open. As you are passing through you see written on the opposite side are the words chosen before the foundation of the world. There is a tension between the two that must exist.

I heard the story of a bunch of theologians who got together to discuss the tension between predestination and free will. Things became so heated that the group broke up into two opposing factions. One man, not knowing which to join, stood for a moment trying to decide. At last he joined the predestination group. "Who sent you here?" they asked. "No one sent me," he replied. "I came of my own free will." "Free will!" they exclaimed. "You can't join us! You belong with the other group!"

So he followed their orders and went to the other faction. There someone asked, "When did you decide to join us?" The young man replied, "Well, I didn't really decide -- I was sent here." "Sent here!" they shouted. "You can't join us unless you have decided by your own free will!"

You probably know that this spring we had a problem with squirrels getting into the church. I heard about a small town had three churches: Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist. All three had a serious problem with squirrels in the church. Each church in its own fashion had a meeting to deal with the problem. The Presbyterians decided that it was predestined that squirrels be in the church and that they would just have to live with them. The Methodists decided that they had free will, so they chose to deal with the squirrels lovingly in the style of Charles Wesley. They humanely trapped them and released them in a park at the edge of town. Within 3 days, they were all back in the church. The Baptists had the best solution. They voted the squirrels in as members. Now the squirrels only show up at Christmas and Easter.

When a Calvinist says that all things happen according to the predestination and sovereignty of God, he speaks the truth. When an Arminian says that when a man sins, the sin is his own, and that if he continues in sin, and perishes, his eternal damnation will lie entirely at his own door, I believe that he also speaks the truth. The fact is, there is truth in both these systems of theology. -- Charles Spurgeon

The reality is that God chooses and we choose, and somehow in the power and sovereignty of God those two things always line up. Suppose your parents owned a successful family business. Before you were even born, their goal was that you would someday inherit that company and run it. When you were born they picked the best possible education for you. They steered you into opportunities to prepare you. They determined when the best time to start working at the company was and what on and off the job training was required. Years later, because of their planning, you were ready to take over. Now, you can decide whether or not to do it. You can follow their guidance or opt out and do your own thing. Either way, there is a plan.

God has a plan for life. It is the best plan. God knows you and created you for a purpose. He has given you everything you need to do what He has called you to do. However, it is up to us to do it. We were selected. God has blessed us from before the beginning.

2. Saved (vs. 7-10) - present

God has not only called us and blessed us in the past, he is blessing us in the present. Look at the words that are used here. God has redeemed us, forgiven us, poured out His grace upon us.

Jesus has redeemed us. There are a number of Greek words that are used to communicate the idea of redemption. The first is Agorazo. This means to purchase.

The Agora was like the shopping mall of the ancient world. You would go to the Agora to buy things, including slaves. The word Agorazo is the picture of buying a slave at the market.

The second word for redemption is connected to it. It is the word Exagorazo. It is the combination of the word Agorazo and the word Ex which means out or from. Together it means to purchase out. It is not only buying a slave, but then taking them out of the market. Removing them not only from the position of slavery but also from the place of slavery.

The third word, the word that is used here, is the Greek word Apolutros. It means to set free. It takes the picture one step further, not simply the purchase of the slave and taking them out of the market, but then giving them the freedom and tools to go. We are not just freed from our past but blessed in our present.

Jesus has poured out His grace upon us. I love that word LAVISHED. It is the Greek word PERISSEUO which means super abound, exceedingly abundant – even excessive. God has not simply given us a taste of his goodness, a tiny trickle or grace. He has poured it out upon us like an ocean.

The world is full of abundance and opportunity, but far too many people come to the fountain of life with a cup instead of a tank car ... a teaspoon instead of a steam shovel. They expect little and as a result they get little. – Ben Sweetland

Back in 1990 many soldiers had been deployed for the Gulf War. That Christmas, a town in Georgia decided that it wanted to bless the families of the troops that were serving overseas. Arrangements were made at a local toy store that the children could go in and choose anything they wanted for Christmas. Reporters from the local TV station were there covering the event.

One 11 year old girl walked in and was told like the others to choose whatever she wanted. She walked up to a bin near the front doors with little stuffed animals on sale for a dollar and pulled one out. Slowly turning it over and over in her hands, she shyly asked, "How much does this cost?" The manager replied, "It's all paid for honey. Pick out anything you want." The little girl asked again, "But how much does it cost?" Again, the manager replied, "It's all paid for. Pick out anything you want. Anything in the whole store." A whole store filled with anything her heart desired for free, and all she could focus on was what was the cheapest.

We are like that with God sometimes. God pours out His grace upon us in such vast measure, yet we fail to grasp it. We reject the offer.

Yonge St Mission donuts.

3. Sealed (vs. 13-14) - future

God has not only blessed us in the past and present, we have a blessed future waiting for us as well. We have an inheritance waiting for us.

The verse that we read this morning ends saying "Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory." Through the Holy Spirit (and the evidence of a changed life) we know that we are the children of God. We have assurance that there is an inheritance waiting for us in heaven.

On December 31, 2012 the body of 60 year-old Timothy Gray was found under a Wyoming overpass. He was a homeless cowboy who had died of hypothermia and exposure. Timothy Gray had made some bad decisions in his life. He had a string of bad luck. There was also one important detail about his life that you need to know, he was about to inherit millions of dollars.

Timothy Gray's great-grandfather was William Clark. He made a fortune in the Montana Gold rush and went on to become a very wealthy and successful businessman and politician. He started a town as a maintenance stop on one of his railway lines in Nevada. A little town you may have heard of – Las Vegas. Clark County, Nevada (where Las Vegas is located) was named after him. At one time he was one of the 10 wealthiest men in America. When he died his fortune was passed down to his daughter Huguette Clark. She had died the year before in 2011 at the age of 104. Her will which gave the details of who would inherit her \$300 million fortune had been tied up in the courts for months. Just a few weeks after Timothy Gray died, the money was released. He inherited 19 million dollars.

So how does an heir to a fortune end up dying like a pauper? Timothy Gray knew his family history. He knew how much money his aunt had and that he was going to inherit a huge amount of it. He just chose to do nothing about it. He chose to ignore it.

If that had been me, I would have been camped out at the court house. I would be reading all the documents. I would be out at the mall pricing new suits and putting in an order for a new car. Maybe getting a Realtor to price out home in the area. I would be making plans. One thing I would NOT be doing. Living like a homeless person under a bridge.

Church, we have a great inheritance that is before us. Some day in the not so distant future God is going to call us home. That day will be the culmination of something that happened in eternity past, when God made the decision to create you and choose you to be with Him for all time. Oh what a glorious day that will be.

Until then, we need to remember that God has blessed us. Past, present and future, God has blessed us. Maybe it is time we start living like it.

Closing Blessing

You are a child of creation, a reflection of God, no one can steal your beauty or reduce your worth. Unless you let them... so don't let them!

You are a miracle of God's love, never look at yourself and see anything less!

Your life is not a random stroke of chance, you are part of a sovereign plan,

Loved into existence...loved for an eternity.

So, let the fire in your soul live and laugh and leap with joy!

And for the short time you walk upon this earth remember...

That you are the light of the world!