

What is a Blessing and How do they Come?

James 1:25

Part 1

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

Preface

What is a blessing and how do they come?

At one end of the spectrum we have the Word/Faith movement routinely promoting the notion that God wants all His people to be blessed with health and wealth. Similar to how God spoke the universe into existence, Christians (it is asserted) have the ability to speak good things into existence. Variations of this are found in churches which promise healing, supernatural deliverance from addictions, financial success, etc.

Without questioning motives, I must say this brand of Christianity (at least as I understand the faith) engages in serious theological error which I have found to border on (if not extend over) the abusive. It is kind of a lottery Christianity with one winner (who often ends up on stage) and a thousand losers, who may try for years to receive the blessing, fail, grow discouraged and walk away. It targets the hurting, the weak, and the vulnerable and, therefore in my opinion, is pernicious.

On the other end of the Christian field are those who almost utterly disassociate their faith with any material, observable or temporal blessings or curses whatsoever. According to this view, any mention in the Bible of blessings for obedience is consigned to the world of the immaterial or heavenly kingdom. This is much closer to home for those who might consider themselves reformed in theology.

One popular reformed radio personality was adamant that the promise in the Ten Commandments of long life and things going well in the land (on the earth—Deuteronomy 5:16; Ephesians 6:2, 3) to those who honor their mothers and fathers should not be applied to the New Covenant church.

A fictional candidate for the gospel ministry in a book entitled, *The Law is Not of Faith* says of the blessings and curses found in the law that there is

...no promise of earthly blessing for the church today if we meet a standard of obedience. Saying either of those things (blessings for obedience or curses for disobedience) might be simple, but of course they'd be misleading, and damaging for the church to hear (parenthesis mine).¹

According to this brand of Christianity, the Bible is very limited in what it has to say concerning the blessings or curses in the material world. Governments, families, cultures, etc are part of the kingdom of man and it is a mistake to assume blessings or curses in those venues based upon human behavior or man's adherence to God's law as it is revealed in Scripture.

All blessings, according to this view are found in the atoning work of Christ alone and are spiritual in nature. The Old Testament (which contains the majority of the teaching regarding blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience) is to be understood typologically – whatever blessings there are in the Old Testament for obedience are fulfilled in Christ's obedience.

And in the same way I just taught that the Word/Faith teaching can be abusive or pernicious, those who hold this view are concerned that the promise of any earthly blessing for obedience is “misleading, and damaging.”

So, what is a blessing and how do they come?

The Apostle Paul tells us that **“in Christ”** we have been **“blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:3)**. This, of course, is central to our faith and pertains to things immaterial and eternal. It is because of the uniformed agreement from all parties concerned, in relation to this, that we can agree this to be a discussion among Christians. Those, for example, who might teach that we receive

¹ *The Law is Not of Faith*, Estelle, Fesko, VanDrunen (P&R Publishing, 2009) p. 5.

these heavenly blessings through our own obedience are teaching a “works righteousness” which is outside the pale of biblical Christianity.

But is this the totality of it? Are all blessings spiritual? And is it accurate to say that human behavior – obedience/ disobedience has nothing to do with God’s blessings or curses in the material/observable world in which we currently live?

At one end we have Christians claiming riches, health and power based upon putting themselves into an obedient or “receiving posture” with God and on the other end we have Christians who utterly dismiss the notion that human behavior can result in curses or blessings at all, calling it a “works principle” leading to or equivalent to gaining “eternal life through obedience.”

What is a Blessing?

So what is a blessing? This is a gargantuan question. The Bible is so full of blessings that we could never accomplish answering this question in our given time. Suffice it to say there are two words in the Hebrew (Old Testament) and two words in the Greek (New Testament) which are primarily used for blessing. In the Hebrew the words are *barak* and *ashar* and in the Greek the words are *eulogeo* and *makarios*. The distinctions in these words are not major.

The word ‘bless’ can be in the form of a verb “**to bless someone or something,**” an adjective “**blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**” (1 Peter 1:3) or a noun, when out of the mouth “**proceed blessing and cursing**” (James 3:10). In its very basic form it means to be, pronounce or request happiness or divine favor.² Very often the context will furnish the key to determining what the word entails.

For example, when we read of Abraham blessing God (Genesis 24:48) the word evidently means to worship, praise or exalt. The word has a similar meaning in Psalms 145:1, 2 and 103.

Bless the Lord, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! ² Bless the Lord, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits (Psalm 103:1, 2).

²Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (1:441). New York: United Bible societies.

We read of Jesus *blessing food* at the Lord's Supper and the feeding of the 5000 (Luke 24:30; 1 Corinthians 10:16; Matthew 14:19) where it likely means to consecrate or set apart for a holy use.

We see the similar use (that of consecration) used when God *blesses a day*, the Sabbath and hallowed it (Exodus 20:11).

As we read earlier, there are manifold *spiritual blessings* in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), but we also read of blessings in a very *material* sense.

It was said that Abraham was blessed by the Lord who had **"given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys"** (Genesis 24:35). Job was said to have been blessed by the Lord with **"sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys and sons and daughters"** (Job 42:12, 13). The blessing pronounced on Rebekah was associated with a rich and numerous progeny. In the Scriptures we see blessing associated with **"children, grain, wine, oil, cattle,"** etc (Deuteronomy 7:13).

Peter calls Christians to bless those who do us evil since Christians are called to this, that they may inherit a blessing. He defines the blessing and the mean by which it comes:

For "He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. ¹¹ Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. ¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:10-12).

Peter then explains that even if the outward manifestation or definition (that of something which appears positive) of a blessing is not present, that does not mean God isn't blessing His children.

And who *is* he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? ¹⁴but even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, *you are* blessed (1 Peter 3:13, 14).

If we're willing to acknowledge that God's fatherly discipline (Hebrews 12:6) of the one's He loves is a blessing, we know that we are

continually the object of His blessings. Nonetheless, the Bible does seem to speak of blessings in terms of a positive experience (and by positive I am not suggesting that the discipline of God is negative, but its loving design is to produce the blessing of the **“peaceable fruit of righteousness”** [Hebrews 12:11]).

So it is not difficult to conclude that the full scope of God’s blessings includes almost anything that can properly be understood as good or positive, whether material or immaterial, temporal or eternal. Such being the case, how do blessings come?

How Do Blessings Come?

Let us acknowledge at the get-go that blessings or curses often have little or nothing to do with human behavior. Job is the obvious example of one who was cursed even though he was **“blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil”** (Job 1:1). Nonetheless, the Bible does often speak of a sort of cause and effect when it comes to blessings or curses.

Our opening passage this morning tells us that the man who is a **“doer the work”** (*ergon*) of the law will be blessed **“in what he does”** (literally ‘in the doing of him’ *en te poiesei autou*). The association between human behavior and the consequential blessings or curses enumerated in the Bible are copious.

As stated in the Fifth Commandment, and repeated by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6, the honoring of parents results in things going **“well”** and **“long life on the earth”** *hina eu soi genetai kai ese makrochronios epi tes ges*. There are more Proverbs than we have time to examine where we see this principle at work. Proverbs 8:32 teaches that **“blessed are those who keep my ways”** then we see examples:

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is hold he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6)

He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow, And the rod of his anger will fail. ⁹ He who has a generous eye will be blessed, For he gives of his bread to the poor” (Proverbs 22:8, 9).

He who has a slack hand becomes poor, But the hand of the diligent makes rich (Proverbs 10:4).

These are but a few samples from Proverbs alone. The Apostle Paul does not shrink back from utilizing this principle in his instruction for New Covenant Christians.

Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits (1 Corinthians 15:33).

But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ So let each one *give* as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:6, 7).

Reformed Theology

Some, who perhaps don't view the Protestant Reformation as a historically monumental turning point in the advancement of the kingdom of God, may not be concerned with this following point. But since the view that I am addressing (no promise of earthly blessings or curses for a standard of obedience) is something people are claiming to be historical reformed theology, I think John Calvin's take on the matter (being the quintessential reformer) is worth mentioning.

Contrary to the radio personality we of spoke of earlier, Calvin's view of the promise connected with the fifth goes as follows:

...that the reward promised to the obedience of children is highly appropriate. Those who shew kindness to their parents from whom they derived life, are assured by God, that in this life it will *be well with them. And that thou mayest live long on the earth*³.

Calvin then explains the New Covenant slant on the promise:

³Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Ephesians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Eph 6:3). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Moses expressly mentions the land of Canaan, “that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.” (Exodus 20:12.) Beyond this the Jews could not conceive of any life more happy or desirable. But as the same divine blessing is extended to the whole world, Paul has properly left out the mention of a place, the peculiar distinction of which lasted only till the coming of Christ.⁴

In other words, the promise is not restricted to Canaan but to the “whole world.” Regarding the law, in general, Calvin writes:

That he may encourage us in every way, he promises present blessings, as well as eternal felicity, to the obedience of those who shall have kept his commands, while he threatens transgressors with present suffering, as well as the punishment of eternal death.⁵

Do We Earn the Blessing?

A reasonable question at this juncture might be, who is worthy of a present blessing? Clearly we cannot make God our debtor when it comes to the blessing of eternal life, but do we make God our debtor when it comes to earthly blessings? In other words, if we honor our parents, does God owe us a good and long life? Calvin’s explanation, with which I heartily agree:

But though in every passage where the favour or anger of God is mentioned, the former comprehends eternity of life and the latter eternal destruction, the Law, at the same time, enumerates a long catalogue of present blessings and curses (Lev. 26:4; Deut. 28:1). The threatening attest the spotless purity of God, which cannot bear iniquity, while the promises attest at once his infinite love of righteousness

⁴Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Ephesians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Eph 6:3). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

⁵Calvin, J. (1997). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Translation of: Institutio Christianae religionis.; Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (II, viii, 4). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

(which he cannot leave unrewarded), and his wondrous kindness. Being bound to do him homage with all that we have, he is perfectly entitled to demand everything which he requires of us as a debt; and as a debt, the payment is unworthy of reward. He therefore foregoes his right, when he holds forth reward for services which are not offered spontaneously, as if they were not due. ⁶

So the “cause and effect” principle which I mentioned earlier is not entirely accurate as we understand physics or human interaction. When God promises a blessing for obedience (long life for honoring parents), it cannot be said that God has now become our debtor. Calvin’s point, a point Jesus makes in Luke 17:10, is that even if we have done all things commanded, we’re simply paying a debt we owe. That God promises a blessing is His way of graciously presenting the blessing as if we didn’t owe Him all.

If I can illustrate: If I tell my children that I will pay for their college education providing they clean their rooms and brush their teeth, it would be silly for them to think they’ve earned their own college education – as if I owed it to them for services rendered. As a father my promise would be good. But they should still recognize that it is all of grace, even if I set conditions.

The Ultimate Blessing

Perhaps all of this has initiated many other questions. How good do you have to be? How come blessings/curses don’t come? Can blessings become a curse? And I will seek to address those questions in our next meeting. But I would like to end with a brief heralding of the ultimate blessing – a blessing which does have a mighty cause and a sure effect. It might be called the ultimate blessing?

When Peter made a profession of faith that Jesus was “**the Christ, the Son of the living God**” (Matthew 16:16), Jesus explained to Peter that he was truly blessed and specifically explained from where the blessing came:

⁶Calvin, J. (1997). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Translation of: *Institutio Christianae religionis*.; Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (II, viii, 4). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 16:17).

To apprehend that Jesus is the Son of God reveals to us that we have been truly blessed. And the only cause is the love, grace and mercy of God through the cross of Christ who purchased us by His own blood. And there may not be a better description of how this is a blessing than the one explained by the Apostle Paul in the fourth chapter of Romans.

...just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; ⁸ Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin" (Romans 4:6, 7).

When God blesses us by opening our eyes to faith in Jesus, the attending blessing is the removal of sin, which Jesus bore for us on the cross and the imputation of righteousness – the transferring of the righteousness of Christ to us – that when God sees us He sees no sin but His own child who He set free from sin and upon whom He lavishes every spiritual gift in the heavenly places in Christ. And all of this is apart from anything anyone can possibly do.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the two ends of the spectrum when it comes to receiving blessings (pages 2, 3)?
2. What did it mean when Abraham blessed God (page 4)?
3. What does it mean to bless food or a day (page 5)?
4. Are spiritual blessings the only type of blessings (page 5)?
5. Do blessings only come when people behave a certain way (page 6)?
6. Does the Bible teach a sort of cause and effect principle when it comes to blessings? Explain and give examples (pages 6, 7).
7. Is the principle of earthly blessings or curses for obedience or disobedience consistent with Reformed theology? Is it consistent with the Bible (pages 7, 8)?
8. Do people actually earn a blessing from God? Explain how cause and effect isn't entirely accurate (pages 8, 9)?
9. What is the ultimate blessing (pages 9, 10)?