



The Blessing

Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today is a message that has been a long time coming at our church. We're talking about *The Blessing*. If you have your Bible, here or at home, turn to Numbers 6. We're going to look at the blessing that God gave to Moses, to give to the priest, to give to the people as they traveled to the Promised Land.

As we launch into this today, I just want to ask you... I want you to think for just a moment about a person in your life who maybe it's in the past, maybe it's right now, someone who speaks a blessing over you. Maybe it was years ago, they spoke a blessing over you, or they spoke life into you. How many of you have someone in mind right now? It doesn't have to be a lot of people, but you have one or two.

I do. I can think back to years ago. He's been with the Lord now over four years, Dr. Gary Smalley. He actually wrote a book called, *The Blessing*, where he talked about that meaningful touch, the spoken words of high value, the act of commitment, and picturing a special future. I remember him sharing that with me and, four years later, after he has gone to be with the Lord, I still remember words that he shared with me.

Joe White has been another one in my life to speak blessing over me. Every time our family gets together, and we pray together with extended family, it's our desire to speak words of high value, honor, or to speak a blessing over one another.

Here's kind of what I've learned. I don't think you need a bunch of people. I have a few and I am grateful for how God has used them. That's why when I saw this meme a couple of months ago, I thought it was just the perfect meme and it describes a lot of my friends. It says, "I like coffee, fishing, and maybe like three people." How many have seen that meme. I sent it to my friend R.P. Harrell and I said, "I found the perfect meme for you," and he responded with, "I don't even know if I like three people."

You get the idea. I like more than three people, but in the world that we live in, I have to have hundreds, I have to have thousands of friends. Show me a person who has one or two individuals that are there, that are always there. No matter what you go through, no matter what you do, you can pick up the phone and call them, and they will speak life into you, they will speak a blessing over you.

I hope, as this message goes on today, that if you don't have that person in your life, I hope this church is a source of blessing for you. I hope this church speaks life into you. I hope you find community here and can find an individual or two that invest in you, that speak over you.

Alex said it a couple weeks ago that he doesn't like weddings, but I do and that's true. I love weddings. I love doing weddings, I love being a part of weddings, because the word *honor*, the word *blessing*, flow out of weddings.

My family spent all week at the Family Kamp here in Branson, and they let us sneak away for an afternoon so I could be a part of a wedding, the wedding of Jasmine and Nick Monteleone. They are actually in this service. I'm going to ask them to stand because they wanted to stand. They want to be known. They're like, *don't do this to me*. They got married on Tuesday, and I don't want to say anything to everybody, but they are in church the Sunday after they got married, so can I just say way to go? Stay standing for just a second because I want the church to know your ceremony was beautiful. All the work that you put into it. It was a very traditional wedding. It was at the Green House Two Rivers.

The music played and Doug Gabriel walked Jasmine down the aisle, and I asked the very traditional question – "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" He said, "Her mother and I," through a lot of tears. There was a lot of crying at this wedding. Then they stepped forward and they heard a message from me, exchanged vows and rings, but do you want to know what the most special part of your service was? And one of your groomsmen, Nick, came up to me afterwards and said, "I've never been part of a wedding where at the end of the ceremony friends and family gather around, lay hands on the bride and groom, and speak a blessing over them and pray over them.

You're going to forget a lot of details of that day. You're going to have to go back and watch the video to be reminded of a lot of things that happened, but I can promise you that you will never forget the family and friends who laid hands on you and spoke a blessing over you and spoke life into you.

We say around here at this church that every marriage is a duet in need of great backup singers. You were surrounded by great backup singers. You both nodded, giving permission to every single member of your family and friends who were gathered there that day, on Tuesday, to rejoice and delight in you and to praise your love more than wine, Song of Solomon 1: 4. You gave them permission to speak into your life. You gave them permission to hold you accountable to the vows you exchanged before God and gathered witnesses.

I was driving home, reminded of this... You want to talk about how the blessing comes full circle? For 18 years we've been going in Branson, and as a young punk preacher, I would go a couple of times a week to Panera Bread. It was me and the old man coffee club. I would sit and have coffee with them for about an hour. A man by the name of Don Gabriel would always find me afterwards. I was in my late twenties, getting started in a church, and your grandfather spoke blessing over me regularly in Panera Bread of all places. For me to be able to drive away from his granddaughter getting married and watching people bless you, that is what I hope this church is all about. Would you help welcome newlyweds – Jasmine and Nick Monteleone. Love you guys.

Speaking life, speaking blessing over... I hope this marks your home. It was Gary Smalley's passion that homes would be homes of honor and homes of blessing, that people would speak words of life over one another.

Today, in Numbers 6, we get this blessing. Around the middle of March, we started hearing this song called *The Blessing*. I've heard it from every continent. Amen if you have heard it too. I've heard it in many languages, and I've learned that I cry with every language. I can sing along in English no matter what language it is being sung in. It's a simple but profound blessing, but the context of it, to me, is so fitting, and I think it's why it resonates with us right now. Why has this song been so used by God? Why has this passage of scripture, why has this blessing been so used by God during this difficult season in our world?

We read in Verse 22 of Number 6, **22 The Lord said to Moses, 23 "Tell Aaron and his sons..."** So, this is why in your Bible it may say above it, "The Priestly blessing." When you see priestly blessing, don't for a moment think that this is something that's only supposed to be spoken by pastors or priests. No, you can speak the truths of this blessing over your family. You can speak the truths of this over friends and over people who need to be reminded of what we're going to learn today.

So, the Lord gives it to Moses, who gives it to Aaron. So, from the Lord to Moses, and to Aaron and his sons, to the Israelites. It's very important that you get the context of Numbers 6. Numbers 6 comes in a chunk of Numbers from Chapter 1 to Chapter 10. They've camped for almost a year at Mt. Sinai. They are now making preparations to leave Mt. Sinai and go to the Promised Land. What is between Mt. Sinai and the Promised Land. Somebody tell me. The wilderness! Does anybody feel like your living in a wilderness right now? In such times of uncertainty. That's one of the reasons why this blessing has blessed so many of us during this time.

Yesterday, Amy walks outside to let the dog out and she looks up and she's like, "Man, something is going on outside." I said, "Oh, that's sand from the Sahara that's dropping on Branson today. It showed up today." Now a year ago I would have told her that and she would be like, "Oh, come on." But yesterday she was like, "Yeah that makes sense." We've had the disease, the locust, the riots, and now the sand! What are the chances that we're covering a passage today from the wilderness and the Lord brings us sand just to make a point on this text?

Today, we are going to learn the truth of God in our lives, the truth of God for his children, and you can be certain of it. I think that's why I have found myself listening to *The Blessing*. This is why I find myself sitting on a rickety lawn chair in my garage for hours on end. Carson will be walking by and go, "Man, that's a long song." It's just on repeat. I'm listening to it over and over again because we can't go nowhere. Indian Clay Oven is still closed. Thai Thai is still closed. Everything is closed, we ain't got jobs, we ain't going to work, nothing's happening. By why has this song so resonated? In such uncertain times, we can be so certain about what we're talking about today.

Here's the blessing and here's what we've been singing. By the way, if you're watching, don't tune out as you know the message is coming to the end and you start picking up keys and stuff or go get more coffee. Don't go because the worship team, the production team, our creative team has prepared one of the most beautiful elements throughout, I believe, of all of quarantine and maybe in the life of our church, to bless you and to sing this over you at the end of the message today.

“This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: 24 ‘The Lord bless you and keep you...’” If you are taking notes, just write next to this *protection*. We talk about God’s protection. ***25 ‘...the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you...*** Grace is not just a New Testament concept; we have it all throughout the scripture. ***26 ‘...the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.’”***

27 “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

Here’s what this blessing is. They are going from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land and they will be going through the wilderness. This is one of the most often quoted Jewish prayers. It is going to be spoken over them every single day, which was the intent. And it’s to remind them of the presence of God during this time. That when all else is gone, we know God is with us and for us. That is the reminder what the blessing brings us. No matter what we’re going through, the amount of uncertainty that we’re dealing with, the amount of loss that we have gone through, we can count on the fact that God is with us and for us and fighting for us.

One of the contributors to *Desiring God*, John Pipers ministry, puts it this way. *“God took the initiative to assure his people of his settled intention to bless them. He seemed to want to make it clear that he intended to be personally involved in their lives as the source of all the goodness they would enjoy.”*

So, the question becomes... And when we hear the word *blessing*, it may take some of you back to the church that you grew up in. We used to sing a song in our small Baptist church; sing it with me if you know it. *“Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your blessings, see what God has done! Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God has done.”* And those are every Baptist that we have at Woodland Hills at the 10:00 am. Some of you are like, *“I have never heard that song in my life.”* We were told and we were taught to count your blessings because it is a reminder during thin times, it is a reminder during difficult times of how God has provided for you and for your family. Be reminded through your experiences of how God took care of you.

What if this blessing, given to the children as they go through... And they’re trusting God. They are called to trust God in this journey. **The blessing is more than something from God, it is more of God.** The root of this is in the protection and in the grace and in the peace, the favor of God resting on his people. At the center of all of this is the presence of God. You have to get that to understand his blessing. God is with you and for you through it all, no matter what comes our way. The blessing is more of God.

So, let me ask, when you’ve lost it all... We can give a list of everything that’s been lost in the last three months: income, jobs, businesses... I have friends who have lost churches that have closed, time with family and friends. Some of us have had a lot of time with family and friends, but some of you have grandma and grandpa in assisted living or in nursing homes that you’ve not been able to see but maybe through a window. But then we have family members at our church that are in interior rooms that don’t have windows, cut off from family and friends, loss, loss, loss. When all is stripped away, is God enough for you? Will you rely on his presence? Loss has a way of reminding us of the blessing of not just what God brings us, but the blessing of God’s presence in our lives. In tough seasons, we seek more of God rather than just something from God.

Nancy Guthrie goes on to say... I want to read some words. She really ministered to me in the past couple of weeks as I've not only prepared for this message, but as I have just allowed The Blessing to be spoken over me and allowed other pastors and worship teams and continents and other languages to sing it over me. She says the reason The Blessing is resonating with us right now and the reason these words that come to us bring us such peace, reminding us of God's presence...

She says, "If we really believe that God is the substance of blessing, we won't confess that we're blessed only in the circumstances that seem good. Instead, when times are hard, and even when the worst things we can imagine are happening to us, we'll be able to say that we are blessed."

"We'll call ourselves blessed and mean it because we're experiencing the presence of God with us and in us — in ways we were barely aware of when life seemed easy."

Did you catch what she said there? Right now, we are more understanding, we have a better sense of his presence because we're not holding onto the other things. We get very caught up in worshipping creation. You've heard me say it before, but one of the reasons I love sharing the gospel with fly fishermen is because they all love to worship creation. I tell them, "You're already worshipers; you're just worshipping the creation. If we could just get you to take one step from worshipping the creation to the creator."

That's what happens when we have material blessing. We can hold onto those and we can be comforted by those when, follower of Jesus, we're called to be comforted by the presence of Christ. We're called to be comforted by his presence in our lives and not allow the blessings of God, material blessings to distract us from the presence of God.

She says, "We'll call ourselves blessed and mean it because we're experiencing the presence of God with us and in us — in ways we were barely aware of when life seemed easy (and good). Because we know the Lord is keeping us and being gracious to us, our sense of security and peace won't be so tied to our circumstances."

It won't be tied to our businesses. It won't be tied to the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which is what we call a roly coaster. It's not tied to that. It's not tied to the news today. And all God's people said... Amen. It's not tied to the news cycle. It's tied to the presence of God in our lives... period. That's where we find our peace – the presence of God. She didn't say all this. I'm adding to it, obviously, as I go here.

"In our desperation for him during difficult times, we'll find ourselves incredibly blessed by an increased sense of his companionship and comfort."

She says, "Anything and everything good that emerges from our lives will be a result of his sovereign presence in it."

So, let's break down the three parts of this blessing and then talk about how we can give it to one another.

1. The Lord bless you and keep you – protection. Rabbi Jonathon Sacks says, *“Part of this protection in the blessing is to protect you from allowing blessing to turn into a curse. Blessings turning you or the people of God becoming blind and deaf to the good things God has given us.”* That his presence alone would keep us and comfort us.

2. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. Line three sounds very similar to line 5. Here's the difference. In this line, the Lord make his face to shine on you. This is that his countenance would rest on you. And that when people see you, they see the Lord. Think about that for just a second. People you encounter...

Yesterday, I encountered protestors. We went to get ice cream where our daughter works, and the protest was going on up the road. As we were approaching it, Amy said, “You are turning right before we get there?” “Oh no, I'm driving right smack down the middle of it.” I drove down the middle of it... And I'll get to this part in just a second, but as I drove down it, I found myself praying for both sides of the road, remembering what we talked about a couple of weeks ago, the Imago Dei, the image of God in man... Both sides of the road.

Do you want to know what's true about both sides of the road? Both sides of the road were created in the image of God, personally autographed by God and highly valuable. Both sides, no matter what their tattoo showed, no matter what their flag said. One guy had his flag out over the road and I'm like, *I'm going to hit it.* No, I didn't. I drove around it. I was praying so I had to be in a little bit better place. But this is what I know is true. Follower of Jesus, think about this. What is on you? Because for them it was the contenance.

Rabbi Sacks says, *“Make his face shine upon you,” it means make his presence and may it be evident in you. May he leave a visible trace of his being on the face you show to others.”*

3. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. *“To make peace in the world...”* This is a word we need right now. Before you're worried about peace in the world, let it begin with you. Here's what we are going to know from this blessing. Too many people... You'll hear it. This is new agey teaching that is bad. “Look deep inside and you'll find it.” No, look to Him and you'll find it. I've always picked on Oprah with this one, but Oprah says, “Look inside and you'll find all you need.” No, you will not; you'll find a mess. Don't coddle your inner self; look the One. May His face shine upon you. May He turn his face toward you and give you peace.

I love how the Rabbi puts it. *“...we must be at peace with ourselves.”* How are you at peace with yourself from your Father in heaven? How do you find that peace? *“To be at peace with ourselves we must know that we are unconditionally valued.”* You have value. I love this. He says God ignores the image we project to other people. Why? Because we can't pretend with him. He knows us. You are unconditionally valued.

Your value comes from God, not me. How I treat you doesn't determine your value. If you want to be at peace, understand your creator and the image of God in man. Now, we said this and we have to keep saying it to make sure this is clear coming from our church. Through creation, you are an image bearer. Through salvation in Christ Jesus, you are a child of God. You have automatic, intrinsic value because you are created in the image of God. Through placing faith alone in Christ alone, confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that he has been raised from the dead, you will be saved and become a child of God.

Your value though, the Imago Dei in man... Please hear this because some of you feel worthless today and this is why the blessing is so important for you. You feel worthless today and of no value because of the way people have treated you, but the bottom line is **your value is not based on another's thoughts, feelings, words, or actions.**

Some of you had a spouse that left you for another woman or another man, and it made you feel ugly, it made you feel worthless, it made you feel unworthy of love, and someone treated you poorly... This is one of the reasons I love pastoral counseling, and this is one of the reasons... You can ask our Marriage 911 folks around here. There is no greater joy than to meet with someone who from their heart, speaks words about themselves that you know are not true. "I have no value." There is no greater joy than to pronounce that a lie. "I don't know who told you that, but it's not true. God loves you. He is for you."

It's not how people talk about you, it's not how they treat you, it's not even what they think or feel about you. That does nothing to your value. In other words, nothing I say or do can add to or take away from your value. Nothing. This is why we want to be people who speak life and speak this blessing, showing God's favor to people, letting them see that from us.

Proverbs 18: 21 says, **The tongue has the power of life and death...** Woodland Hills Family Church, can I implore all of us, during this season and from now on, to be people of life when we speak and when we post? Let us be peace makers. Let the peace that we receive from our heavenly father shine through us and to everyone.

I didn't post a lot this week because online was just vicious this week. I stayed off and you know what? I'm a healthier person today because of it. Can I just encourage you? How about when we go online this week, we're speaking life, not death. And just ask the Holy Spirit to call you by name right now if you've been speaking death, if you've been speaking violence and resentment. **...and those who love it will eat its fruit.**

Who do you know that needs the blessing right now? Who do you know that you need to speak this over? Who do you know that you need to speak life into? Speak words of high value over someone who feels worthless. You want to find joy in ministry? This is where it's at. Tell someone this week... I'll give you some starter lines, talking points. "The Lord is for you and so am I." "You matter to God and you matter to me."

Max Lucado actually says every time you invite someone over to your home and share a meal with them and show them hospitality... That word hospitality comes from healing. People should be healed while eating at your home.

Dan Cathy, the CEO of Chick-fil-A says, "A good meal heals you 30% in the stomach and 70% in the heart." Unless you're a teenager and then that's flipped. But that's what a good meal does. People should leave your home and even beyond your home, if you're practicing hospitality as a Christian, they should leave your presence going, "I matter to God and I matter to them."

How about this one? Somebody needs to hear this from you this week. "You don't need to pretend with me. You're holding back right now. You don't need to hold your words back. No need to pretend. Whatever you've done, whatever you've said, I love you no matter what. I'm going to be present. I'm not going to be like other spouses or other friends or other employers or whoever it may be that walked away from you. I'm showing this active commitment."

The last part of Gary Smalley's and John Trent's blessing was that act of commitment, that presence. I have two kids, 15 and one soon to be 17. They never, ever have to wake up in the morning going / *wonder if Dad's going to be here for me today?* I'm there. Your kids need to know this from you, but you need to be speaking this over them about their heavenly Father. Show it in your own life. Proclaim it over them.

As we head to the New Testament, we kind of see this outline again. I'm going to share it with you and then share the gospel and then let the worship team share. We've been talking about God's presence and Hebrews 13: 5 says, ***5 Keep your lives free from the love of money...*** And we've been stripped from that right now, haven't we? ***...and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*** God's protection.

Romans 8: 31 says, ***31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*** God's peace.

John 16: 33 says, ***33 "I have told you these things, so that in me (Jesus) you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble."*** Don't get that mixed up. In Jesus you have peace. ***"But take heart! I have overcome the world."***

This is why in our home, we say this is going to be a home of honor. Corynn and Carson, you're speaking life to one another. Siblings, please here me. If you're in here with your sibling right now, can I just see your hand. I just want you to get this "speaking life." I've told my kids this since they were very small. "The world has plenty of trouble. They're throwing nasty at us all day long. They're cussing at us all day long. They hate us. But when we come in this home, this is a safe place. This is En-gedi," which I love to use from the Song of Solomon. "This is an oasis in the middle of the dessert. This is where we come to be refreshed, replenished, renewed, where we relax. I'm not stepping into this home and dealing with what I deal with out there. May this be a home where we're speaking life into one another and speaking blessing over one another." ***"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."***

Philippians 4: 7 says, ***And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***

I wanted to close this message on *The Blessing* with showing and sharing how the gospel fits with The Blessing. That's the last part. **The blessing resounds with the gospel of Jesus.** As I started taking notes, I went back to Nancy Guthrie, the contributor for *Desiring God*. I'm just going to read her words. I put my notes aside. This is just too good to understand how the gospel flows through the whole blessing.

She said, *"We enjoy God's blessing only because Jesus experienced the full measure of God's curse in our place."*

"We can be sure that the Lord will keep and protect us because Christ was not protected. We can revel in having the Lord's face turned toward us only because he turned his face away from his own Son as he hung on the cross. We can be sure that the Lord will lift up his countenance upon us only because when he looks at us, he sees us robed in the righteousness of Christ. He is able to grant us his peace only because his anger was exhausted on another."

"To be blessed is to be joined to Christ so securely that we have an ever-increasing sense that we are being kept by and for God. Because we are recipients of lavish grace, we can be honest with God and other people about our sin. Because the Lord is giving us peace, we can face the future confident that there is therefore now no condemnation for us because we are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)." And all God's people said... Amen

If you have never placed faith in Christ, that today would be the day of your salvation. Watching at home, on Facebook, or on our livestream, that today would be the day you confess your sins, acknowledge your sins, repent of your sins, remove yourself from the throne of your life for there are ways that seem right to a man, but in the end, lead to destruction. That if you would confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that he was raised from the dead, you will be saved. And you'll move from not only being an image bearer because of creation and the *Imago Dei*, to being a child of God because of what Jesus did for you. And that's the ultimate blessing. We encourage you to receive that today.