

Chapter 7 – Blessing

Introduction—

The final spoke of the metaphorical wheel, the Integrity Wheel, is blessing. This spoke is at the 6 o'clock position on the wheel. Blessing is one of those terms among faith groups which has a multitude of meanings and uses. Typically, though, blessing is used as if it is a quantity of some sort. Qualifiable elements remain somewhat abstract. Referencing blessing assumes the source of blessing is from God. The source of energy for blessing, on the Integrity Wheel, comes from the hub, just like the other spokes. Typically, as well, blessing gets assumed upon as if it is one category of communication from God. One receives blessing, in other words. Perhaps with this examination that follows, one can begin to consider that blessing has a cumulative source of energy from the other spokes.

Jacob—Looking for Blessing

Jacob was a figure of note in the previous two spokes, loss and place. And, certainly, there are other examples from Christian Scripture besides Jacob with regard to the informative and formative influences. But, the Hebrews gave such diligent attention to Jacob that any one of us can find resonance at some point with his life story.

The longer one reads the narratives and contemplates Jacob's life, the more noticeable is how out of sync Jacob was with those around him, with life and God. One could almost imagine his "blessing spoke" was broken.

With Jacob, we can pick up on how one operates out of what her/his character shows that person to be. Listen to his language, for instance. Much of it was unhealthily centered on himself.

Egocentric, individualistic, all in for himself.

The self-examination, self-perception exercise can be good for any and all of us. There are many good personality inventories that can help us identify our propensities, strengths, weaknesses, especially toward how we relate to people. For those in theological education that I worked with over the years, I often suggested for them to think about examining their character traits. For, it is observable that people do ministry work out of who they are and who they are becoming.

Another way of saying the idea is that how we relate to people comes out of our sense of how we relate to ourselves. We forgive as we are forgiven and forgive ourselves. We comfort out of how and from whom we have been comforted. As we are blessed, we bless.

Jacob's story gives us much to ponder upon about a life being lived out of a sense of not being blessed. That realization finds expression in Genesis 32:22-30, especially v. 26, as Jacob says out loud what has been bugging him all his life. He had no sense of blessing.

With the aid of his mother, Rebekah, he had stolen what was by Hebrew custom to go legitimately to his brother, Esau. Likely reflecting more of his mother's character bent toward manipulation, Jacob had lived on the product of his wits for years. Where Esau was a man of the field, the earth, a hunter, Jacob was the one who planned, plotted, and conspired to get his way.

The only person that bested Jacob was his uncle, Laban, Rebekah's brother. This quick look at a family should cause us to give some consideration to what contemporary socio-biologists talk about and explore. How much of our character is the product of nature—our genes—and nurture—the cultural/sub-cultural context in which we are reared and live.

Maybe that point appears to be too fast and loose with the scripture. But, look back to the early narrative about the fraternal twins. There it is noted that Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Jacob. Nobody knows how many episodes that happened in smaller and subtler ways that were just like the birthright for porridge experience. How many other times had Rebekah and Jacob plotted to connive through and across some relational boundary lines.

In those few words of how one parent favored one son over the other and the other parent favored the other one lies what contemporary family systems people will identify as a dysfunctional family. The truth is that all families display some level of dysfunctionality—some more than others, of course. There are many kinds of dysfunctionality, one form of which is quite expert at covering the dysfunctionality.

Where did this favoritism begin in the Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob family? Could it have been with how the sons were named? Esau was born first, but with Jacob holding Esau's heel as he was born. The name given reflected that event—the second of the twins was the “heel grabber,” the literal meaning of Jacob. Think about it, though. How was it for Jacob growing up with the name that could easily go into the nick name of not just heel grabber, but “tripper,” which is not far off “cheat.” The constant experience was to live over, beyond, or maybe up to the name of being one who works the angles to his benefit. Did Rebekah find herself in the role to be the one who stood up for Jacob? All kinds of possibilities, as there are in every family as these kinds of dynamics develop over months and years.

The point about Jacob is that he had lived a sneaky life. He was a restless, searching sort. There were edges to him that indicate that he was dangerous to himself and certainly to others. And, all that because he lacked a sense of blessing.

What Is Blessing, Anyway?

The word “blessing” is prominent in most Christian conversations. Likely it is another of those that gets used but the assumption is that everyone hearing or using the word knows what it means. Too often, it may be more of a filler, pause, hesitation word than anything that carries substance.

Many years ago, as I moved from one building to another on the campus where I was part of the faculty, it was not unusual to pass on the sidewalk students going to class. Their typical greeting was “Bless you, brother.” I say typical because the male students outnumbered the female students considerably. But, the truth was many of those male students had no place in their greetings for “Bless you, sister.” That trend not only continues but has grown in popularity among some congregations, institutions, and denominational infrastructures.

“God will bless you” is certainly in vogue, especially as you may watch tv evangelists. Or, those who construe the Gospel to be one marked by prosperity. If income is the standard by which those people’s lives are gauged, they are doing well. Some of them testify, with a straight face, that their calling as “God’s anointed” requires them to have private jets, several houses, and what many of us would have to label as a celebrity lifestyle. In the cases of these, who some call hucksters and prostitutes of the Gospel, one does not have to use too much imagination that if they were to write out the word “blessing” the “s’s” would be replaced by dollar signs.

Several years ago, when our younger son was a little older than two, he walked into the kitchen, turned to my wife, opened his mouth to speak, and then sneezed, and sneezed again, and, sneezed, yet again. She asked, “Are you ok?” To which the little guy replied, “Yes, Mommy, I’m

just God blessing you.” Quick reply. Clever reply—and I still have not worked out the theological implications of his statement, and I think they are there! What gives me some start, though, is that he may have been very much on target about how we use blessing—rather loosely and to cover a multitude of situations.

Why Should We Give Attention to “Blessing”?

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, takes a deeply serious view on the matter of blessing. A concordance study will show how the term is part of the conversation between God and people early on and continues. Matters of legacy, inheritance, and life in the here and now have their contours shaped by “blessing.”

The Genesis 32 text demonstrates how “blessing” or the lack of it was the core of Jacob’s life. “Blessing” represented the capstone of life for him. He had attempted at finding fulfillment through a superficial sense of blessing. Whatever he possessed—material things, emotional satisfaction, and so forth—had come by being stolen, even abused. Perhaps this point reminds us again that Jacob’s story can be very close to our own, depending upon where we are in life.

So, take note of people you know. Take note of that which you know about yourself. Are there those moments, circumstances in which you have been tempted to manipulate a sense of control of life of rewriting rules, so you win. Are those not really a search for blessing?

The routine was popular so many years ago that the best way to catch up on it is to find it on YouTube. A comedy team, Dick and Tom Smothers, talked about who was the favorite son. The skit was called “Mom Always Like You Best.” Tom was convinced that their mother was partial

to Dick. He illustrated his point because Dick got a dog for a pet. Tom, however, got a chicken for a pet. That kind of pet was a part of the burden of life for Tom—indeed.

The essence of humor is irony. At least two different themes are brought together to demonstrate a paradox carries a deeper truth. And, there was point of the Smothers Brothers routine, a sobering message for many people. They are convinced that their mother and/or father really did treat their sibling(s) as the favorite(s). But, what if they did? What if your perception of blessing and favoritism is not perception, but was and is reality?

Dealing With a Sense of No Blessing—

What have you done with those inadequacies you have labeled about yourself? Consider a process that can give some sense of understanding of this idea.

1. The first part of the process is to do some identification.

No better illustration comes to us than the soliloquy from King Richard in Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's Richard III:

I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's

Majesty

To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;

I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,

Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,

Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time

Into this breathing world scarce half made up,

And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;--
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,
And descant on mine own deformity:

Truly, Richard pushes us to have a level of reality and authenticity that can be off putting, stunning, even stupefying.

2. Perhaps a better starting point for recognizing one's inadequacies is to ask questions of one's self like these:

At what do you feel threatened? When do you sense someone getting to you, maybe slighting you? Could the anger you have be a kind of transferred anger from days gone by, a relationship with one's parents which never quite resolved? It was only when I told my father, years after I lived in his home, when I had children of my own that I told him, "I get angrier with you than any other person on this planet," that some of my own resolution of inadequacy began to come. Perhaps losses experienced, as delineated in the last chapter, have exposed vulnerabilities, or what you might define as inadequacies.

3. Explore how much searching you are doing for blessing in relationships.

Engaged persons talk about worshipping the ground the fiancée walks upon, but they are disappointed when that individual reflects some flaws.

There are emotional illnesses which arise from the lack of relationships, or consider themselves to be abandoned selves if relationships aren't presented like they want.

Interestingly, some persons who are in service kinds of vocation often express a sense of lack of blessing. Those who are pastors, for example, have difficulty quantifying their sense of blessing. Some use the numbers related to “building, budget, and baptism” as the markers of blessing. Ministerial jargon—insider language in any vocation, for that matter—comes to the surface particularly in groups of ministers only.

I've been to lots of meetings of ministers only. Sometimes my self-entertainment came from observing the variety of “ministerial walks.” The body language involved in walking can be used to project a particular image—important to the walker, and intended to impress, to project worth, fulfillment, blessedness.

4. Where is your struggle for blessing—to hear from others, significant others: “You are blessed; you are doing a good job; you are ok?”

Recognize those points of struggle—and here is the irony, the paradox—as the call of God into the wrestling match. For it is ultimately, finally, and as completely as we can experience anything in this mortal life, the emotional filling; spiritual renewal; the confidence to face life. The promise of being blessed is shalom—peace, well being of one's self, one's relationships, one's context, on and on until the whole of Creation experiences peace, well-being, blessedness.

5. The outcome of Jacob's wrestling match, was a serious limp, but much more.

There was further consequentially a transformed character that intended to extend blessing to everyone else. The transition from asking for blessing to giving blessing may be one of the more difficult parts of this process. But look at the end of Genesis 49 as Jacob gave his last will and

testament. He left instructions to be buried in the field of Machpelah with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah—and Leah.

Jacob finally came to terms with his family ties, I think. The ones who had been for him more curse than blessing finally after the struggle could be blessed. He could forgive them for what he perceived as shortcomings. It is interesting that Leah is included here—the wife who was not his first choice.

Begin with blessing God—another term for worshiping, adoring God. That frame of mind will inform and form the direction of blessings that should follow from you toward others. Bless your own family. They are the ones who know us at our best and our worst. In turn, you know them at their best and worst. Blessing your family will take you to the places of forgiveness, love, and grace needed to smooth the relationships that seem to be in sync and then out of sync. In your opinion maybe your parents were unjust toward you. In your opinion maybe your brother was the favorite. The Christian thing to do is to forgive them—to say and to mean, “I wish you well; I bless you.” The result is that as you are able to bless others your own sense of blessing will grow.

Truly, consider yourself blessed, but then how can you offer well-being to others?