

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Luke 6:17-26

The Blessed of God
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When someone sneezes we often respond, “God bless you.” I have always wondered why and that prompted me to do a brief “Google” search. Of course, there are many theories revolving around the tradition. One is that the phrase is attributed to the 6th Century Pope Gregory the Great. It was a response he used to those who sneezed in his presence as the sneeze was a sign of certain plagues. (This was their only hope.) Another is the belief that when one sneezed your soul left your body and this was a blessing to protect it from being taken over by the devil. And, others believed that when you sneezed you gave the devil an opportunity to enter your body and “God bless you” was a blessing to prevent that. (Aren’t you glad you came?)

What does it mean to be the “blessed” of God. The word blessed as it is used in Luke and Jeremiah can be translated as “happy.” Happy are those who... Now these do not seem like situations where “happy” is appropriate – there must be more. Part of the key is found in our Jeremiah text, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.”

Jeremiah does not begin with blessings but with curses. Now he is not referring to those who have some type of “curse” put on them. He is referring to a condition— he is referring to those who trust in the wrong things. Those who trust in themselves and the schemes of the world. We have lived through many utopian ideas of how “man” can solve the problems of the world. It was not too long ago that it was believed that modern science was the answer to all the world’s problems. If we only trust in science all will be well. The problem has been not in science but in “man”. We are failed creatures and failed creatures do not always do what is best for the rest of the creation.

Men and women fail. It does not matter what area of life we are looking at there are failures. From politicians to religious leaders, from celebrities to sports figures we all fail. Jeremiah is talking about those who trust in the schemes of humans. Recent ponzi schemes have made paupers out of those who trusted in get-rich schemes. Jeremiah is saying that we should not trust in money, power, influence, prestige or even self. These are things that the world often equates with greatness and success.

The “Blessed of God” are those who simply trust in God. He uses the image of a tree planted by a river, by the water. Happy are they who are like this tree. Their nourishment is always there. In times of heat and in times of drought they have a root system that provides the nourishment they will need. It is not that there will not be times of intense heat or intense drought but that they are in a place where they will be sustained during these times. There is no need to worry or become anxious – they know the very presence of nourishment, the very presence of God.

There is a strength that says all is well. They know that their God is able to deliver them even in the harshest circumstances. Remember the story of Joseph and his brothers. Jealous of his father’s favoritism Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. After years of separation they are united again but this time Joseph is the one in power. As their father grows older they wonder if Joseph will seek revenge after their father’s death. The writer of Genesis gives us these words, *“But Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me,*

but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:19ff NIV).

Luke follows in Jeremiah’s footsteps in his understanding of the “Blessed of God.” The blessed, or happy, in God are those who trust in God. Luke becomes a little more specific than Jeremiah (although Luke could be called the Reader’s Digest Condensed version of Matthew’s, Sermon on the Mount). Luke uses specific human conditions: poor, hungry, mourners or those who are persecuted. These are those who do not seem to be in a position to be blessed according to the thinking or standards of the world. What they do have in common is that they need to trust in God. They understand that God and God alone is empowered and able to provide for their needs. They look beyond the immediate to an unknown future.

And again the woes are for those who trust in themselves. They are the ones who know that “I” can accomplish anything and that “I” can do it all alone. They have failed to see how “blessed” they are – they begin to think that all they have is of their own doing. They have reached this point by their own power and ingenuity. They have built a future on self and have lost most or all concern for their neighbors, for the global community of creation. They trust in all the wrong things, power, prestige, money, etc.

Now, trusting does not mean doing nothing. It is not sitting at home and waiting for someone to bring the harvest to the door. Seeds are useless unless they are planted, cultivated and harvested. We can go hungry because of our idleness. We need to plant in order to harvest.

Trusting is not sitting back and waiting for history to change the world. Trust is our believing that God has given us a mission to change the world and working toward that end. Trusting is our using the resources that God has given to us. Trusting is participating in life. I often wonder how people think we can fill the church when we don’t invite anyone to come. How will the world know our faith if we are silent about it? We are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, to be the very presence of God in the world. When we have done all we can do -- then we trust God to bring about the harvest after we have planted and cultivated the soil.

In summary, the “Blessed of God” are not
Those who are successful by the world’s standards (not giving God the glory).

Those who trust in themselves.

Those who have large bank accounts (not a proof of God’s blessing).

Those who have positions of power and prestige.

The “Blessed of God” are those who

Walk in faith, planting the seeds, depending on God for the harvest.

Those who look to a certain future beyond understanding.

Those who know that in the end, our God will reign.

People fail. Systems fail. Programs fail. Pick up any daily newspaper or turn on any television news program and you hear of people and programs that have failed.

Those who are the “Blessed of God” are those who in the midst of darkness still trust in God. Philip Yancey in his book, Prayer, tells of Helmut Thielicke and his life during World War II in Germany:

I recently read the memoir of Helmut Thielicke, a great German preacher of the last century who lived a life that might rival Job’s. He lost his university positions for opposing Hitler, endured humiliating interrogations by the SS, and faced the constant threat of imprisonment. As the war growled to a close, he walked to his Stuttgart church one day only to find it bombed to rubble and returned to his home to find his house destroyed. His heart nearly broke when he came across his famished children licking the pictures of food in recipe books. And each week he stood in a pulpit and tried to bring a message of hope to a demoralized congregation, standing now amid the crushed stones of their former sanctuary.

‘The one fixed pole in all the bewildering confusion is of the faithfulness and dependability of God,’ Thielicke declared to his congregation, remarkable words considering their context. He assured them that God’s faithfulness can never falter, and that through the labyrinth of history and the disorder of personal lives there runs the constant thread of God’s purpose. (325)

The Blessed of God are those who, in all things, trust in God.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Yancey, Philip, Prayer, Zondervan, 2006