

“The Soul Needs Blessing”

Date: October 25, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 145:1-12; Numbers 6:22-27

Occasion: Soul Keeping series

Theme: Blessing, gratitude

On this Sunday, we conclude the sermon series called *Soul Keeping*, based on John Ortberg’s book by the same title. I’ve been very gratified with the response to this book, our sermon series, and the study groups that have been meeting on Sunday morning and Tuesday nights. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

For that I am grateful. Today we find ourselves back in chapter 13 of his book, exploring the theme of blessing. I thought it a fitting way to end our study.

“Blessing is not just a word. Blessing is the projection of good into the life of another,” says Ortberg. He goes on to say, “Blessing is done by the soul.” “The soul is seen when it reaches out in love. The Bible’s word for this is blessing.” (p. 153)

The opposite of blessing is cursing. But cursing is much more than swearing at someone or putting a hex on them. You can curse someone with the look of an eye. You can curse someone with a shrugged shoulder. A dismissive “*whatever*” can be just as damaging as if you had sworn at a person.

The soul is extremely sensitive to the difference between blessing and cursing. The reason is our souls were made to be blessed, and we cannot survive without the blessing. Some people, men included, live their entire lives waiting to be blessed by their father or mother. When they never get it, the soul is wounded deeply.

Pastor Ortberg correctly tells us there are two ways that we treat people. We bless them, or we curse them. Those choices are as inescapable as breathing out and breathing in. We are either reaching out in love, or we are dismissing people, wounding people, cursing them. Blessing or cursing. We choose.

The soul was made to be blessed. Our souls thrive when they are blessed. They cringe when they are cursed. We can learn how to bless; Ortberg shares that he learned how from his good friend, Dallas Willard.

Blessings take time, so don't hurry. We're moving so fast in our society today, you might have to grab hold of someone to get them to slow down long enough that they can receive the blessing. We need to learn how to receive a blessing as well.

Too often people think they're unworthy. Or as soon as someone begins to bless them, we start to plan how we'll give a blessing back. But giving a blessing is meant to be a one-way gift. It's not a form of barter. It's grace. You're offering another soul grace.

Dallas Willard uses the ancient formula found in the book of Numbers. He says you can change the wording if you want, but it's hard to improve on what God has already given us.

“ The Lord bless you...” This means, may the Lord constantly bring good into your life. Like food that goes into the body, words go into the soul. You are wishing for that person all good things that will make life good for them. You are intentionally seeking and desiring for God to bring good into their life.

This is not something the other person has to earn. We're not talking about reinforcing good behavior. My parents, God rest their

souls, wanted to praise their first-born child, so they taped his good school papers on the refrigerator. I learned that my parents loved me when I did well. I know that's not the message they wanted to send, but it's what I heard. "My parents love me when I do well."

The fear in my heart was - will they stop loving me if I do bad, or if I make mistakes? It was many years later, like high school, when I told my parents about papers from first grade that I hid under the front porch that were not perfect.

The blessing is not about praising good behavior. It's unconditional. You see, God loves us, not because we're good people. God loves us because we are His children. God loves every soul, even the ones who are not perfect. That's why He sent his Son.

So we begin the blessing, "The Lord bless you..." We continue, "The Lord...keep you." What that means is that we are asking God to protect the person. We're asking that the care and sacrificial love of Christ poured out on the cross should guard all that is sacred and precious about that person. Protect them!

And then, "The Lord make His face to shine upon you." Now what does that mean? Well, think about the face of a grandparent doting on a grandchild. When a grandma or a grandpa is in the presence of a grandchild, their face lights up, it radiates joy.

May God's glory shine upon you as God looks into *your* face. Glory shines. And so your face is meant to shine. May God's smiling face, as He looks upon you, bring joy to you.

"The Lord lift up his countenance upon you." Lifting up your countenance is what we do to let someone know we are fully present. Early in our marriage, Barb would come into the living room and try to

talk with me while I was reading the newspaper. I would half listen. It hurt her that I wasn't giving her my full attention.

I have learned that I need to put down the paper, or whatever else I'm doing, and lift up my countenance, look Barb fully in the face. Then she knows that I am truly present, and I can really hear what she is saying. It shows I care about her.

"May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you." It is the wish and the prayer that God would let his presence be fully known. May you know that God cares about you personally.

"May the Lord be gracious to you." Here, we are asking that God would not give us what we deserve, but that God would offer us grace. May God look past our faults, our failures, our shortcomings, and deal graciously with us.

The benediction concludes with these words: "And give you peace." Unthreatened, undisturbed peace. This is what we want for those we love - for them to experience unthreatened, undisturbed, life-giving peace.

"May the Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace."

Everybody has a soul. Blessings or curses, we get to choose how we treat people. We demean people when we forget they have the depth and dignity of a soul. Even the people I don't like have souls. May we learn to bless other people's souls as God blesses us – freely, unconditionally, graciously. Amen.

Sermon borrows heavily from John Ortberg's book *Soul Keeping*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2014, pp. 152-160.