West Van Baptist, October 25

Blessing and Being Blessed

1 Peter 3:8-18a

I. Beginning with "blessing"

Aaaaa-chooo! And (hopefully) people respond with "bless you!" That is the traditional answer when someone sneezes, at least in many western countries—though of course some of you might say "gesundheit" or "à tes souhaits" instead.

In this part of the world, which has been strongly influenced by the Bible over the centuries, "blessing" is a part of our vocabulary. (At least, it is in Christian circles. I've noticed that my secular neighbors hardly ever use the term anymore, except in response to a sneeze or to describe someone's children.) We Christians use "blessings" at the end of letters and emails, we say someone has "blessed" us, we ask for blessing when we pray. We say "the blessing" before meals. Sometimes if we're a bit frustrated with a person we like, we might say "bless their heart, but …." According to the agenda for today's service, I'm supposed to pronounce a "blessing" at the end just after I mention that we're going to have coffee in the lobby.

But what exactly does "blessing" actually mean? I wonder how many people could give a good definition if asked for it?

The Bible uses the word in 3 main ways.

- People bless to *acknowledge that something or someone is good*. Many psalms tell us to "bless the Lord," which means to praise Him because we recognize how good He is.
- We can bless to *express a desire that someone will experience good*. This is what fathers do in the Bible when they bless their children; and it's what I'm supposed to do at the end of this service.
- A person blesses by *actually doing something good or giving something good* to others. God "blesses" us when He answers prayers, or grants health and other good gifts.

In short, *"blessing" is acknowledging, speaking, or sharing good in the context of a relationship*. One person "blesses" another by giving something good, desiring good for the other, or recognizing good in them. Making it personal: blessing is something I can receive, or offer, or share. I sneeze: "Aaachoo!" You "bless" me with the wish that I would have health. You might "bless" me with medicine to make me healthy. And I might respond, "Bless you, you're very kind."

You'll find the word "blessing" everywhere in the Bible. In fact, there's a sense in which we could sum up the whole message of the Bible in terms of blessing given, lost, and given again.

When God created the human race, the very first thing He did was to bless us (Gen 1:28). He gave us life, a safe and delightful place to live, and a long list of good things to make that life fruitful and enjoyable. God saw that His creation was good, and He poured out good things on us so that we in turn could worship and enjoy and bless Him.

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If you read a little further in Genesis (chapter 3), you arrive at the point where sin entered the world—where human beings stopped trusting and obeying God and tried to center their lives on themselves instead. The result? God's many blessings were damaged, and for the first time we start to read about curses. Curses haunt the rest of the Bible's story.

But that's not the end. Soon after, God began to talk about blessing again. In Genesis 9 we're told that "*God blessed Noah and his sons,*" using the same words He had spoken earlier over Adam and Eve. Then we get one of the most important promises in the whole Bible, the promise to Abraham: "*I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you*" (Gen 12:2-3).

This theme of renewed blessing runs through the rest of Scripture. God established the nation of Israel to be a blessing to others. God appointed David and his family to be a source of blessing. Ultimately Jesus teaches that His followers will be blessed (for example Mat 5:3-12), and they will bring Abraham's blessing to all the nations of the world (Gal 3:8-14). This is summed up beautifully in Ephesians, which begins: *Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ* (1:3). Ephesians goes on to describe how Jesus will bring God's redemption to the whole world, working through His body the church to share the message of blessing to others.

The Bible's story is a story of blessing given, lost, then given again through Jesus. Within that story, God's people—first Israel and then the church—receive God's blessing. We are invited to respond by blessing and worshipping our Lord. And we are to be channels of God's blessing to others. Blessing is something we receive, and give.

That's the background to this morning's Scripture passage in 1 Peter 3. There's a lot in this passage. But the main theme that runs through it is blessing: God has blessed us through Jesus, and we in turn are to be channels of His blessing to others.

II. Blessing in 1 Peter 3

We can't dive deep into every detail this morning. But let's have a look at the big ideas.

(1) We are called to <u>be</u> a blessing

Last week we saw that Christians are ambassadors for Jesus, representing Him wherever He puts us. We finished with the transition verses from 1 Peter 3:8-9.

> *Finally, all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude. Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing.*

We could spend a whole sermon on verse 8. In a healthy church where we represent Jesus well, we will look for agreement rather than constantly arguing; we will be sympathetic and caring, loving each other as deeply as we love our brothers and sisters. We will be compassionate and never hard-

hearted. We will show humility, putting others ahead of ourselves. And when someone wrongs us, we will never retaliate.

That's what we're called to be like. We read similar instructions everywhere in the New Testament. It's what Jesus is like, and it should be our constant goal. And when we live this way, we *bless* each other—we bring good into our community and into one another's lives.

Peter is writing to people who face many difficulties, including mistreatment and persecution for their faith. So he emphasizes that we should bless even when we are treated badly. This is what God has called us to do. It's our job as Christians. We bless each other by living in a Christlike way, and when faced with unkindness in a hostile world, we respond with blessing—wishing good, praying for it, and extending it to others.

(2) We are called to <u>receive</u> God's blessing

Peter says that we are called to give blessing, but also to be recipients of God's blessing. Literally in the Greek, Peter says: "*for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit blessing*."

That word "inherit" is important. It's a reminder that God doesn't just bless us with this or that nice thing in life (though He does do that). Peter has emphasized God's whole plan of salvation, which brings grace and peace and joy now, with hope for abundant and eternal life with Him in the future. It's an amazing inheritance. Thinking back to Ephesians 1:3, *He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing Heaven has to offer*. What an encouragement for people who are currently facing hardship! We enjoy many good things now, with much more blessing to come.

Here Peter inserts a quote from Psalm 34.

> *If you want to enjoy life and see many happy days,*
> *keep your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from telling lies.*
> *Turn away from evil and do good. Search for peace, and work to maintain it.*
> *The eyes of the LORD watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to their prayers.*
> *But the LORD turns his face against those who do evil.*

If you read the whole of Psalm 34, you will find that it is full of blessing. It begins: *I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise will continually be in my mouth*. It goes on to describe many of God's blessings to us, and tells us to *taste and see that the Lord is good*.

This part of the psalm also reminds us that God places expectations on the people He blesses. He blessed Adam and Eve, and gave them instructions so they could walk with Him. He blessed Abraham, and gave him instructions. He blessed Israel, and gave them instructions—a whole lot! And He has blessed us as followers of Jesus, but He has instructions for us as well. Peter tells us repeatedly that we need to put off that old life God has delivered us from, and live in the truth of what God has saved us to be.

This isn't about earning God's favor or love. Adam and Eve didn't earn God's love; neither did Abraham. Nor do we. Peter keeps telling us we were "called" by God, reminding us of His gracious *gift* of life in Jesus.

Nevertheless, if we are going to be ambassadors of Jesus and channels of His blessing, there are some instructions we need to follow. These are for our own good. As we obey the guidance of God's Word, we find that we experience His blessing more fully, and we're able to share that blessing more effectively.

(3) Even in hard places

I think one of the reasons Peter likes Psalm 34 is that it speaks about God's blessing to people in hard places. Again, if you read the whole psalm you will find that it was written by David during one of the hardest times in his life, when he fled the palace to live in hiding from King Saul. The psalm goes on to say, *Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all* (34:19).

Peter writes to Christians who face difficulties. He is very conscious that God's blessing does not mean a life without any trouble. On the contrary, often we are called to bless even when we are treated badly. And often we receive God's blessing in the midst of pain. Peter continues: *Now, who will want to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it*. Literally in the Greek Peter says: *even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed* (3:13).

Nobody likes pain and hardship. These things are part of living in a fallen world. The Bible doesn't tell us that sickness is good, or that it's good when we lose a job or struggle with a relationship or when someone we love dies. The Bible teaches us that it's OK to grieve over our pain. It calls death our great enemy.

But the Bible also affirms that in an amazing, mysterious way, God is able to bring blessing out of pain and difficulty. He can draw us closer to Himself and to each other. He refines us. He makes us more aware of eternal things and of His presence. Many of you know people who testify that this has been true in their own experience. I've heard people share it. It's been true for me. It's why Jesus said: *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me* (Mat 5:11). God wants to bless us, and He can even use pain to do it. So yes, we should respond to hardship and unkindness with blessing.

More than that, God frequently allows us to experience difficulty so that He can use us even more effectively to bless others. Many of you have seen this as well. I have. Some of the people who have had the biggest impact on me did so by the way they lived in the grace of God in spite of their pain.

(4) Jesus' example

Of course, this takes us back to the example of Jesus. Jesus is the perfect illustration that sometimes God works through difficulty to make us a source of blessing for others. Peter will keep hammering on this message: Jesus suffered abuse He didn't deserve in order to bring hope and help and life to you and me. So Peter finishes this section: *Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong! Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but He died for sinners to bring you safely home to God* (17-18).

Jesus didn't just wish us God's blessing. He gave His life to bless us with every spiritual blessing heaven has to offer: "pardon for sin and a peace that endures, God's own dear presence to cheer

and to guide, strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Blessings all ours, with 10,000 beside."

As Jesus' ambassadors—His representatives—we are called not only to enjoy God's blessing but also to be channels of blessing to each other, and to everyone around us—even if it involves pain and others are unkind and undeserving.

III. <u>So what?</u>

Those are the big ideas in our passage. At this point I usually ask: "So what?" Today I'm going to let Peter answer that question himself. You may have noticed that I skipped a few verses along the way. I want to come back to them now. In verses 14-16 Peter suggests four practical things we can do as we enjoy God's blessing and share it with others.

(1) ***"Don't worry or be afraid of their threats"*** (v. 14)

I called the first message in this series "Grace and Peace in a Worried World." Peter's first readers were in difficult places, where it would be easy to get lost in worry and fear. At some point all of us will find ourselves in situations where we could be overcome by fear: fear about our jobs, our families, the economy, the environment, the direction the world is going, our health, our future, and plenty of other things.

Peter never tells anyone to pretend the problems don't exist. He's very honest about pain and difficulty. But he keeps challenging us to think right, to let the truth about God and His good plans be the lens we look through as we see the storms around us. When we understand God's goodness, His grace and all the blessing He has for us, it will help to ease our fears.

More than that, it will help us to fulfill our calling to bless others. If I'm preoccupied with all the things that frighten me, I will become so focused on myself that I can't really extend God's goodness to those around me. As my fear is replaced with trust and worship, I become a better channel of God's blessing. So *don't worry or be afraid*. Let God's truth be the lens that colors your view of the world.

(2) ***"Worship Christ as the Lord of your life"*** (v. 15)

This echoes a theme from last week. How can we be good ambassadors of Jesus? We must be passionately in love with Jesus. Now Peter goes a step further. How can we fully experience the blessing of God? Well, Jesus is the source of that blessing. His death and resurrection made it possible, and when we follow His lead and listen to His instructions, we position ourselves to receive it fully. When Jesus is in His proper place as our Lord and the one we worship and love, good things follow. If we don't make Him Lord? Well, no one every really enjoys Jesus and all He offers without obeying Him.

Jesus calls us to be spreaders of blessing as well as receivers. He gets very practical about this. He tells us we must love our neighbors, live honestly and generously, do good to everyone in His name. So when we put Jesus firmly on the throne of our lives, we not only enjoy God's blessing, but we also naturally become spreaders of that blessing to others.

We need to worship Jesus as Lord. That's what it means to be a Christian. It's not a hardship; it's a source of blessing—it's very, very good!

(3) "*Be ready to explain*"

Blessing others—spreading God's goodness around—involves many things. We do it with kind actions and words, by giving to meet needs and helping where we can. But the greatest blessing we have received is the gospel, God's life-giving message, and the new life it has brought us. So it's only reasonable that we would be quick to share that message with others when we have opportunity. That's why Peter says: *If someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way* (v. 15).

I have friends who teach "apologetics"—the discipline of presenting an effective argument for Christian faith. This verse is where that word comes from. Literally Peter says we should *always be ready to make a defense*—an *apologeia*—for our hope. Today in English, "apology" means "Oh, I'm so sorry, I made a mistake." But in Peter's day an *apologeia* was a defense or reasonable argument you would make in a court of law. Peter calls us to be ready with an answer if someone asks us about our faith.

Peter isn't trying to put a heavy burden on us or leave us feeling stressed. He doesn't tell us that we need to be able to answer every possible question, to know everything there is to know about the Bible, the Christian faith, and how to defend it from every attack. His point is more personal. We need to know why we have hope. When someone asks, "Why do <u>you</u> trust Jesus?" Or "Why do you have hope in a world that feels so hopeless?" we should have some kind of response that reflects our own personal experience. We should be able to say, "I was drawn to Jesus because …" and "I have a sense of purpose and hope in this life because …." We don't have to know everything, but we should understand the basics and be able to share our own story. This is part of what it means receive God's blessing and then to pass it on, sharing with others.

When Peter says, "*be ready,"* he doesn't mean we have to carry around a big apologetics book that we can pull out whenever someone asks us about faith. But we do need to think about our faith, our personal stories, our sense of hope. We need to have some key ideas in mind. We need to find opportunities to talk about these with one another. Even if you've prepared, it can still feel awkward and intimidating to share faith with others who don't believe. It's much harder if you've never talked these things through by yourself.

All of us are called to be blessing-sharers. All of us need to find ways to be ready, so that if someone asks "Why are you a Christian?" and "Why do you have so much hope?" we have something to offer as a response. This is part of how we bless others.

And the goal is to bless them, not to win some battle of wits or prove that we're better and smarter. It's possible to have a very strong argument for Christian faith, but to deliver it in a way that is completely offensive. So Peter cautions: *Do this in a gentle and respectful way*.

(4) "Keep your conscience clear"

Peter is also well aware that our actions speak louder than our words. So he adds: *Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ* (v. 16).

Peter has acknowledged that Christians are sometimes abused and persecuted. He stresses that God may allow this, but it should never be something we bring on ourselves by our bad behavior. That theme surfaces again here. If we want to know God's blessing in full, and if we hope to pass His blessing along to others, our lives must reflect Jesus—in all we say and do, in public and private, in the church and when we rub shoulders with people outside.

God has expectations for the people He blesses. These aren't arbitrary or unkind—they are for our own good, and for the good of others around us. When we are (in the words of verses 8-9) united, sympathetic, loving, tenderhearted, humble, gracious to those who abuse us, and all those other things God calls us to be, His blessing flows into our lives and out through our lives to a needy world that Jesus loves.

"Aaachooo!" Imagine if God sent an angel to your room one night, offering you a cure for cancer—or even just for allergies and the common cold. Wouldn't that be amazing? What a blessing! These days, allergies are my main concern, and I'd certainly welcome that gift with open arms. Perhaps the day will come when I would be eager for the cancer cure, too.

But it wouldn't be right for me to hoard that gift all for myself. If I have any kind of good character at all, and especially as a Christian, I'd need to share the medicine with others. I'd want to bless everyone around me with that wonderful cure.

I imagine many people would welcome it. Perhaps there are some who wouldn't—who would accuse me of being a quack and trying to sell a fake cure for profit. Perhaps some folk in the pharmaceutical industry would be very unhappy because this cure would cut into their profits. I wouldn't care. A blessing of this kind needs to be shared anyway, whether or not it makes everyone happy.

I wish I had a cure for cancer, or even just for allergies and the common cold. I don't. But I'm not discouraged. I remember what Peter tells us over and over in this wonderful letter. In Jesus, God has offered us a cure for sin and all the curses and death that flow from it. God offers a path out of the old life and into a new one which is abundant and joyful and eternal. We taste some of it right now, and there is still more to come. It is a very good thing—it is the greatest blessing any of us could ever receive.

My job, and yours, is to receive God's gift. To turn to Him in praise and thanks, blessing His name. And to share His blessing with others, here in the warm fellowship of the church, and outside, even if we are mistreated in the process. That's the Christian life. And it's a good calling!