

MARCH 28, 2021

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”

SERMON: March 21, Counterfeit Christianity: Blessings, Beatings, and Bling, Matthew 5:3-12, Matthew 6:26-34

This week we continue our series Counterfeit Christianity, and also our series within the series. The larger series we are considering ideas, values, and beliefs held in different pockets of Christianity that don't necessarily line up with scripture and/or the spirit of Christ for the purpose of deepening and clarifying what we believe and who we are in Jesus. The series within the series is Blessings, Beatings, and Bling, which I had thought we could cover in one Sunday but was grossly mistaken.

So far we've considered the "bling". Last week we tackled the idea that the genuineness and strength of our faith can be measured by the blessings of health and wealth in our lives. While health and wealth are blessings at times bestowed by God, though not most frequently, they are a dangerous and poor metric to use to assess our faith. Rather we found that a much more accurate and reliable metric is the fruit born out of our hearts, and the resulting fruit born out in our lives.

This week we are going to take a deeper look at blessing and how to cultivate it. It will be in the cultivation of blessing that we find our counterfeit notion.

The first question is "what is blessing?" Simply put, blessing is God's favor. That's it. On one hand, the vagueness of this definition may be frustrating. We want to know specifics. What are they and how do we look for them? In truth, the vagueness is a wonderful part of its beauty. We are reminded that the favor of God can be expressed in infinite ways. Largely because, as we saw last week, blessings are most frequently expressed in intangibles. And the intangible has no limit to how God can choose to bestow it.

We understand this to be so because of the currency of God. God's currency is and always has been far more in the realm of the spiritual than the material. Everything is intended to grow us closer to God, and more into the image of Christ. This is something that happens within and is connected to those inner workings and experiences of God's Spirit.

We don't need to look terribly far in the New Testament to see this spiritual nature of God's favor. First look at the beatitudes. "Blessed are the..." What are the blessings? Being fulfilled, mercy, comfort, "seeing" God, being called "children of God", laying up reward in heaven, not here, but there. All of this is spiritual in nature.

Consider Paul. One of his most famous verses is in Philippians where he writes "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." God's favor shown in a strength that isn't our own, but flows from God's Spirit to and through us. The context of this verse adds even more.

Paul writes that he has learned to do with and without, how to have nothing and everything, he's known what it is to be free and jailed, and to be secure as well as have people out for his hide. Yet he says "I have learned to be content no matter the circumstance." The blessing of a contented and peaceful heart no matter what is happening outside of and around him.

When Paul is beaten, left for dead, or jailed, what do we find Paul doing when he picks himself up and dusts himself off? He rejoices and praises God that he's suffered for the cause of Christ. When most people would be wondering if they should continue on, Paul is filled with joy and hope. Blessing. God's favor poured out in an unfathomable spirit given the harshness of Paul's experience.

In Corinthians we see yet another, perhaps stranger, sense of blessing. Paul shares that he has some kind of persistent affliction that he's asked God to remove or relieve three times. God has chosen not to. Paul's response isn't some "God do you have any idea how much I've done for you? You owe me!" Rather he shares a remarkable sensibility that God's strength is made perfect in his own weakness.

Paul has the blessing of perspective. He has the blessing of knowing that it's not his own strength that yields success, but God's, and the receipt of God's strength. In fact, some might even say that an affliction that keeps us humble and prevents us from becoming arrogant enough to think it's "all about me" is in fact its own blessing.

This humility is significant. It reveals to us a purpose for God's favor beyond just what we receive for ourselves. Paul shows us time and again that another purpose for blessing is to empower and equip us for God's calling in our lives. What work does God have for us? God's favor poured out is intended to help us know and accomplish it. This work is directly connected to our witness in the world and our mission to inspire others to faith. In other words, blessing isn't just for you or me, it is intended to be used for the benefit of others as well.

Humility is also important as we seek to recognize God's blessings. This openness to what all it could be encourages us to be aware and look for it anywhere. It calls us to have open hearts so that when the spiritual favor is shown we recognize it and can embrace and experience it. Otherwise we find ourselves looking in the wrong place, or perhaps only in the place we want to have the blessing bestowed. If that's not where God is working and acting, we can easily miss the blessings God has rained down on us consistently.

We have to understand that it's not up to us how God shows favor, nor are we to demand when and where it shows up. That is to God and God alone. And so we begin to see a picture form to help us define blessing. Blessing is God's favor poured out, most frequently in ways that are spiritual, how, when, and where God so chooses.

In truth, our appreciation for God's blessing must be immense. The greatest blessing given to all humanity has already been given. God has paid a bill that none of us can, nor can we ever repay. God's favor is shown to all creation in the redeeming work of the cross. Salvation is a blessing available to any and all who will receive it. Anything above and beyond that is gravy.

The next question then is how to cultivate God's favor. There is a false notion around that suggests that blessings increase and flow more readily the busier or more overcommitted we are to the work of the church. To illustrate, here is what the conversation might look like:

Pastor: Brent, we know you have a long history of working with youth. The youth leader position is vacant, and I believe God is calling you to this ministry. To do it right, you'd need to commit to 20-30 hours per week.

Brent: Thank you for thinking of me. I'd really be happy to help, but it would have to be in a more supportive role. Right now I'm swamped at work with a lot of mandatory overtime. You know I've got a couple young kids, and they sometimes need help with homework, and both of them play ball.

I just don't have the extra hours in the week to take the lead and do it justice.

Pastor: Well Brent, I understand your hesitation, but I'm telling you that if you follow this call, God will soften the hearts of your boss to ease up on the workload. You can also trust that while your ministering, God will take care of your family. As long as you are faithful they will be fine.

Brent: I'm sorry, I just don't think I can make it work.

Pastor: Well, I believe this is what God has in store for you. I'm just going to ask that you pray over this for a few days. Know that while you are praying, I will be praying for God to increase your faith to trust Him to handle those other things while you are serving the church.

Kind of knife twisting there isn't it? There is guilt and shame baked into the responses. In truth what this is clearly less a call to serve and more a manipulation to occupy a position.

When pushed on why God would call someone to abandon family or other God-given responsibility, there is a convenient scripture often quoted. "Jesus said that if we are to follow Him we must 'hate our mothers and brothers and sisters and so on'". This is a gross misuse of this verse. Of course Jesus doesn't call us to "hate" anyone, most especially our family. This expression is use of exaggeration to point out that in comparison to our relationship with God, everything else comes in a distant second place.

Along these lines, it also calls us into relationship with God in a way that requires us to seek discernment in how to care for all of the relationships and duties we are given. In other words, to neglect those things that God is calling us to tend to and care for, even in the name of God, is to move further away from God and not closer to.

With regards to family, we needn't look further than the pastoral epistles where qualifications for leadership are related. Leaders should have their household in a state of array. If I want to see that my house is in array, what is one absolute necessity to see that happens? I have to be present in my household, with my family. Abandoning them isn't Godly, it is avoiding God-given responsibility.

Part of the confusion comes because over the many years, we have narrowed severely the definition of ministry. Ministry becomes what the church does, and is conducted by people called "ministers." So if we are called to ministry, naturally it has to be in the context of the more formal programs and goings on in the church itself. This is a mistake.

To minister simply means "to serve." This isn't a part time role nor is it confined to any one category of person. It is universal. It is 24/7. It is the call of each and every disciple of Christ.

Paul is clear that each and every one of us has a role to fill in the body of Christ. That's clear. No role is more vital than another. We often refer to our time, talent, and treasure. How we use these things to serve in the life of the church varies from person to person and even as individuals through different seasons of our lives. Even to the sense of how much what we are called upon to sacrifice in the course of our service. The church, however, is only one arena in which we serve God and serve one another.

We are called to serve our family. We are called to serve in the workplace through excellence of performance and by loving our co-workers. We are called to serve in our leisure activities by living into the image of Christ. Everywhere we go we have opportunity to serve and model Jesus to the world. The question is never how often. That is our full time calling. The question is only the venue. Where are we and with whom as we serve? This leads us directly to how we do cultivate favor. Matthew 6 points directly to it. Jesus is encouraging us to not be overcome with worry, particularly about the material things of life. Rather our first priority is to "seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, then these things will be added to you." Seeking and living in light of God's design and desire. This is what cultivates favor: to earnestly and humbly seek the correct will of God, and surrender to it in heart, word, and deed.

This is easy to say, but difficult to do. The reality drives us directly into the spirit of Lent as we consider Christ's calling to His disciples.

Jesus calls His disciples to "pick up your cross and carry it daily." Also, when the mother of James and John requests a position of prominence for one of her sons in heaven, He responds by asking them "can you drink from the same cup as I?" They respond "yes" to which Jesus replies "you will". Turning back to their mother He lets her know that it's not His place to afford them any special treatment.

When He refers to His "cup", it is the same cup that is referred to in His Garden prayer when He asks God to "take this cup away." It is the cup of His suffering and ultimately His death. Jesus asks James and John if they are able to follow Him, to embrace His will, even if it means to suffering and death.

Taking up our cross has been misconstrued for a long time. It has been framed as referring to bearing whatever our individual burdens or struggles are, and doing so in a Christlike manner. Certainly we all have burdens to shoulder and are called to do so faithfully. This isn't what this statement is about.

For us the cross is a symbol of hope and salvation. For Jesus and His disciples it was a symbol of death and punishment. Jesus calls His disciples to be willing to follow Him even if it means their death. In following Jesus each day they run the risk of some brand of punishment.

Fortunately we don't live in a country where we run the risk of jail, torture, or death simply for believing in Jesus. Nevertheless, to follow the will of God still may require hardship, sacrifice, and even suffering. This isn't a constant state of faith, but it is always potentially on the table. Sacrifice is the nature of discipleship. Typically it will always carry with it some measure of discomfort, humbling ourselves to put another before ourselves, and sometimes that other we may not particularly want to defer to.

Many times God's will may come into line with who and what we want to be. Sometimes it will not. Cultivating favor requires the courage to set aside self when we need to and follow God wherever God leads.

So simply put, God's favor is bestowed often in spiritual ways when, where, and how God so desires, and is cultivated by earnestly, humbly, and correctly discerning God's will and surrendering to it in heart, word, and deed. That favor empowers and equips us to both discern and surrender. This week's message dovetails beautifully into last week's. They are mutually feeding and form a cycle of faith that is always trending upward. We discern the will of God and in surrendering to it meet the measure of a genuine faith as we bear fruit. In so doing we cultivate God's favor which when bestowed helps us discern and surrender, and bear fruit, which then cultivates favor. The cycle continues. Our faith sustains and grows. It deepens and clarifies. Even as we are changed, in following God, we change the world.

This way of understanding fruit, blessing, and cultivation leads to a fulfilled and rich life of faith. We are always being and doing, not stalling. If my sense of faith is that I do something on God's behalf and wait for my blessing to come, and I am only willing to see and accept the blessing I want, what if that's not what God has in store? I'm waiting forever and if I'm waiting to continue acting until I get what I want, I have effectively stalled out.

On the other hand if we live our lives as an act of gratitude, responding to the grace of the cross, we never cease. Continually we seek what God is calling us to and striving towards it. We serve with only the expectation that God's favor will make itself known. Open to whatever it may be, we see and feel it more than ever before. Standing still isn't an option, giving way to a vital adventure that speaks to ourselves and invites the world around us to share in our faith. It is the marriage of me and we that truly brings God's Kingdom to bear.

This brings us to a closing challenge. It was mentioned briefly last week. As we move towards the other side of COVID, we slowly open back up hoping to return to normal as soon as we are able. We've all learned new things over the last year, and in getting back to typical new opportunities present themselves.

What new thing is God calling you to as an individual? What new thing is God calling us to as a community of faith? Has God spoken something to your/our heart that we need to attend to? We have opportunity to discern anew what God may be speaking into our lives. If you have heard God speak, let me know. For as we discern, surrender, and bear fruit, we are assured that God's favor will come into our lives.

BIBLE STUDY: I Peter 1

Beginning a new book, it's always good to get a little backdrop of what is happening behind the scripture, in this case a letter. This letter is written to multiple faith communities all located in Asia Minor. Conveniently for the letter to be delivered, these congregations were all located along the same courier route. As with other letters of this sort, the intent was for it to be read not privately by an individual, but communally, likely in the course of a worship service.

The communities were living through a time of persecution. The letter right from the beginning has a tone of encouragement and acknowledges their circumstance.

Most modern scholars place the timing of this letter somewhere around the year 90. This poses an interesting possibility of authorship. In the ancient world, it was common for a disciple to write in the name of their mentor, even after the mentor's passing. The understanding was that in conveying the teaching of the mentor, it could be signed in the mentor's name to lend credibility to the teaching itself. In this case, if the letter is indeed written in the year 90, Peter's name would have to be attributed to it as he was martyred around the year 64.

For informational purposes, here are some interesting notes about the letter itself that lead to this thinking, and also provide some, I hope, useful information:

The letter blends theology of Peter and Paul. This would have taken place later in the development of the early church. Peter and Paul had some issues with one another, and it wouldn't have been until after the church began to develop and merge that Jew and Gentile Christians would have worked on synthesizing the theology of these two great apostles.

The letter is written in a sophisticated, more high brow Greek that would have been highly unlikely for a common fisherman from Galilee.

The letter is written to Gentile Christians and mentions Silas and Mark, Paul's companions. Peter was the apostle to the Jews.

The kind of persecution referenced in the letter. Persecution was not "one size fits all" all throughout the early centuries of the church. At first, when Christians were considered a Jewish sect they were largely let alone by the Romans, though under persecution from the Jews as blasphemers (think Acts and the stoning of Stephen). As things shifted as Christianity separated from Judaism more formally, much of the persecution was more verbal and in the form of ostracization. There was some more aggressive and violent persecution, but more locally rather than as a policy of the entire Roman Empire. Once Christianity became its own "thing" and was no longer under the heading of a Jewish sect, more widespread persecution throughout Rome became the norm.

Getting into the actual letter, we see it begin with a greeting that automatically lends weight to it not unlike the way Paul begins many of his letters. The author identifies as an apostle. This term had significance. It meant the individual was personally and formally commissioned by Jesus into ministry. This wasn't hearsay experience but something more direct. Whether it is Peter himself or one of his followers, from the beginning we know that the teaching communicated is the genuine article.

The next verses throw us into language that leans towards "election" or "predestination". A more general understanding of election is that God being God can elect, or choose, to do anything God so pleases. Our job isn't to question but to allow the greatness of God is carte blanche permissive for God. A more specific understanding is that God has, from the beginning, decided who will and will not be saved. If you have been saved it's because God chose you to receive Christ. If not, God chose that you be damned.

This generated some discussion in both studies this week where both groups agreed on this notion. The agreement was that it doesn't make sense, and it is the classic debate between Calvinism and Arminianism, otherwise known as predestination vs. free will. Free will makes much more sense. Yes, election is God's choosing, however God has chosen to give all the chance to be redeemed. We are the ones who make the decision whether or not to accept the grace of the cross. This puts an interesting spin on who "sends us to hell." It isn't God. We simply make the choice to live in communion with God in this life which is honored in the next.

The idea that we have a hand in choosing is what lies at the root of the disagreement. For those believing in election, God and God alone is responsible for salvation up to and including who will and will not be saved. To give us even the possibility of contributing via choice is to say we have a "work" attached to it. Yet love and a loving God creating humanity as an object of God's love logically follows that the only way for any love to be genuine is for it to be an active choice. Our opening up to God's love isn't a "work." It is a response and a receiving that leads to a surrendered, servanthood life in gratitude for the grace freely given. God's "foreknowledge" is not the product of God choosing who is "in" and who is "out". It is a product of an all knowing God recognizing who will and will not choose.

We then move on to a segment of verses that is all about the provision of hope. In the midst of vs. 3-9 we see the acknowledgement that these churches are in the midst of trial and suffering. It tells us that these trials are proving the genuineness of their faith. Don't be mistaken here, this isn't scripture saying that God is forcing the trials. That would mean that God is intentionally pushing people into ungodliness for the purpose of persecuting people that love God just to make a point. Rather this is a recognition that in the midst of their suffering, inflicted by the free will of other people, they are exhibiting the depth and strength of their faith by not succumbing to pressure to forsake it. As a result, they will reap a reward.

What is the reward? It is their salvation. It is inheritance that is priceless and imperishable. We hear echoes of the words of Jesus Himself here. Where do we store up treasure? "Do not store up treasure on earth where moth and rust destroy, but store up treasure in heaven." In their faithfulness, they are assured that what is in store is a treasure that isn't able to be stolen or destroyed. It is theirs eternally. They are reminded that there is a hope far beyond what they are experiencing awaiting them if they persevere.

This passage refers to the "revealing" of Christ. Not Christ revealed, the incarnation that had come and ascended. The Christ TO come. The second coming. This is a forward thinking and pushing message rather than vertical. If we look heavenward only in the moment to get us through the moment, we must continue looking "up" and stay stuck in our circumstance. What Peter does here is encourage them that their destination and destiny are already determined. They can look forward and focus on faithfulness because they know the reward already has been determined. This hope is one that propels them forward, preparing them to face whatever comes with confidence and strength.

Finally in this segment, we hear the words spoken to Thomas echoed. "Through you have not seen Him." Remember, Jesus said to Thomas, in the presence of the other disciples, that they are blessed because they have seen. They have had the privilege of witnessing the fullness of Jesus ministry and glorification. Then He says blessed are those who have "not seen and yet believed." These are those Christians. At the same time, so are we. We have not seen, yet we have believed. This message is not just general to these five churches, it is timeless. Every person who has not seen and yet believed is privy to this reward and inheritance as we persevere in faith through our own struggles unique to our own time, place, and context. Next we see yet another affirmation that the gospel in which they have believed and the promises offered are credible and assured. Peter cites the prophets. Long before they spoke not willy nilly or after some vague skimming of a resource. They were diligent, intentional, and Spirit led to understand what and when the coming of the Messiah would entail. He indicates that their mission was more than selfish, it was selfless, looking to provide hope to those who would live into the revelation of the Messiah, of Christ. The gravity, enormity, and awesomeness of their work, cast forward, acknowledged by those who witnessed Jesus, and preached forward by the power of the Holy Spirit are so enormous that even the angels, heavenly beings themselves, seek to understand and appreciate them.

This concludes the "introduction" of the letter. Note the brilliance of it. It begins with credibility, the apostle. It offers a wonderful hope in their salvation and reward as they endure. Then it bookends the introduction with credibility, citing the prophets of old through the preachers of the early church to their ears and the witness of angels.

Then we move to a discussion of holiness. They, and all of us, are reminded not to give in to the temptations around them. Imagine you are a Christian in this time and place. Simply being a Christian makes you stand out. You don't do the pagan rituals or participate in pagan morality. You follow the expectations and love of Jesus. It makes you obvious. You're also being tormented and persecuted because your behavior identifies you as believing in Him. What is the temptation? Start acting like your old self to fit in and take the pressure off.

These verses gently and kindly encourage them that they have expectation. Consider these verses, combined with the faith and hope they received in light of Jesus words at the Last Supper to the disciples in John. He tells them not just to believe, but to act accordingly. This is the essence of where we are here. Trust in your salvation and reward, and act accordingly so as not to lose it by demonstrating in deed that the heart has abandoned Christ.

There is then this verse about the "impartial" judge, and about being "foreigners".

This impartiality is incredibly important. When we are in a place where we are doing the right thing, following the right person, and getting kicked around by those who are doing wrong, we have a question. When we see the unjust powerful and prospering and the just beaten and bullied, we have a question. "How is this fair?" It's honest, and it's understandable. It's also likely what many of these Christians would have wondered. Peter reminds them to think in different terms and timetables. Yes, what is happening now is unfair. No, it's not easy. Yet in the end, there is a judge who sees things for what they are. The wicked who are rewarded in this life ultimately are seen for who they are and receive the just consequence. The just and faithful who are persecuted and suffer in their life are seen for who they are and receive just consequence. While a temporary reward may be with the unfaithful, the eternal inheritance earlier in the chapter awaits the faithful. It is an encouragement, and this sense of reverent fear points them to respect and regard the long term understanding of how God works things out.

The "foreigner" image is also one of hope and assurance. Some translations say "stranger" others say "pilgrim". The sentiment is the same. This world is not our home, heaven is. Our time here is transient, limited. Even if there are things we suffer, they aren't going to be forever. Knowing this we can endure, especially when we grasp that when we arrive in our true home, the Kingdom of God, it is forever. Knowing where we are bound can make the journey all the easier to bear, even when the journey is hard.

These verses that follow beautifully remind them of the pricelessness of their salvation and inheritance by acknowledging that the cost of it is also priceless and eternal. It wasn't bought with cheap silver or gold, things that have no eternal value. It was acquired through the ultimate sacrifice of the perfect Son of God. God made flesh taking the consequence of their sin so that the bridge could be built between imperfect humanity and perfect God.

The chapter ends with a compliment that they have chosen wisely to live into the truth of Jesus and have loved one another. They are encouraged to continue loving one another, and to know that while the understanding of faulty humanity ultimately will meet its end, those who have embraced the eternally true and reliable word of God will similarly receive the blessing of eternal life in the presence of God.

This opening chapter in its generality is incredibly timeless. Every Christian in every age has endured their own trials and temptations. The response to these five churches in Asia Minor is no different to us today. The promise of God's faithfulness to us, our redemption, and our place in the Kingdom of Heaven are assured when we endure whatever our lot may be. God's job has been done, to redeem us and sustain us. Our job remains to be faithful through the best and worst of times, trusting that whatever comes the impartial judge will reward our faithfulness and love.