

Children's Moment *What's a blessing?*

Good morning, boys and girls. We miss seeing your smiling faces!

There's a word you hear a lot, particularly at church.

It's the word "blessing."

Jesus talks about blessings. There are a lot of prayers about blessings. We talk about the church being a place of blessing. You may be asked to give the blessing when you eat at home.

I have a question: what's a blessing?

I believe a blessing is when God's Spirit touches you. It makes you feel good, like when someone says "I love you" and gives a great big hug and a kiss. That's how God shows us God cares.

God's blessing reminds us God loves us. That means God does special things for us because God likes us and wants us to like God. God wants us to share our love with other people.

The next time you give grandma or grandpa a hug, here's something you can say "I love you and God loves you, too."

You know what? That's a good thing to say to your Mom and Dad. It's a good thing to say to your brother and sister. It's a good thing to say to your friends. It's even a good thing to say to your dog and cat.

Do you know what you're doing when you hug someone and tell them "God loves you"? You're passing God's blessing on. That means God's doing something special for them, too. Even better, it means God gets to bless you even more.

Let's pray ...

Message: “Blessings & Curses”

(What are we passing on?)

Thank you for the many ways you’ve blessed Esperanza and me as we celebrate the fourth anniversary of our appointment to Corona UMC. The very first sermon I gave was on blessings. Each year, I return to the topic to remind us of God’s call and promise. It’s the reason we have hope and endure together.

Let’s talk about blessings and curses. During the children’s moment we touched on the nature of God’s blessing. Let’s go deeper. I believe our lives are filled with moments when we’re either blessing others or cursing them.

No one’s free from it. No pastor, servant leader, member, visitor or household is free from this temptation. I have my good days and my bad days, just as you do. There are times when we get frustrated with each other, with a situation or circumstance, and – boom – we let fly. Hurtful language often follows. That’s how we express what’s going on deeper inside us. Our fears, faults and feelings are on display.

I know there are times when I’ve given offense. I’m sorry. I’ve done harm and not done good, just as you have. I’m a flawed human, just as you are. I accept my part in it and the responsibility to do better. We can be better together if we take a chance and walk the narrow path of love, grace and mercy. I forgive you. Please forgive me. The path Jesus shows us is radical, counter-cultural and filled with hope.

Just as blessings go beyond encouraging words, curses go beyond harsh language. Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia gives us a picture of the way we experience curses: *“The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. ... I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won’t inherit God’s kingdom”* (Galatians 5:19-26). We won’t be at peace.

I'm not telling you that having a party is a curse. Social gatherings are good – with safe practices in this time. But we all know the difference between a party and a PARTY. You are smart and wise people. You get the point Paul is making. It's when our motives are selfish and self-centered that we get out of control. That's when a good thing can quickly escalate and become a bad thing.

If that's the nature of a curse, what's a blessing? Paul's letter continues, "... *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. ... If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit. Let's not become arrogant, make each other angry, or be jealous of each other*" (Galatians 5:22-24, 26).

When we follow through on good motives and intent, we do more than offer encouragement. We connect at a deeper level. Our souls connect. That's when we give life. And when we do it because of the love we receive from God, we're passing God's love on. That's why we pass on God's blessings. It's how lives are made better. When we empty ourselves, pouring the blessings we've received into others, we're refilled. We change, one small step at a time. We come to be more like Jesus, which means we're able to be more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled. God's Spirit changes us.

How do you pass your blessing on? Rev. John Wesley, our founder, calls us to do so in this way:

“Do all the good you can.
By all the means you can.
In all the ways you can.
In all the places you can.
At all the times you can.
To all the people you can.
As long as ever you can.”

Many of you have heard this quote. We admire it and aspire to live by it. Yet we struggle to do so. Our very real, human condition works against us. That's because we are sinful by nature. It's what we've learned from the moment of our birth. We are good in God's eyes, made

in the very image of God. That's a blessing. But we've also been corrupted by the evil and injustice that fills the world, the curse of sin. We are challenged spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally.

The apostle Paul knew the struggle. He wrote this:

“The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don't want to do, then I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it. So I find that, as a rule, when I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me” (Romans 7:18b-21, CEB). Sobering, isn't it?

It would be one thing if this spiritual struggle was like an out of body experience. It would be a rare thing. But the reality is that we think, say and do things we shouldn't all the time. Every. Single. Day. Intentionally. We're so used to it we don't even think pause to think about it. We just go ahead. We go our own way to get our own way.

Paul said, *“A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law”* (Galatians 5:17-18).

That's good news, there's hope. God made a promise we can hold on to. Genesis 12:1-3 is the foundation for life. God promises to bless us, our households, other peoples and nations when we become spiritual descendants of Abraham. Jesus invites us to walk that path. It's the way of grace, forgiveness and love. All we have to do is accept Jesus in our hearts. I don't know about you, but that's a message worth passing on.

God is always there, even when you aren't looking.

God is in your corner, your biggest fan. Nothing in heaven or on earth can separate you from the love of God. It's up to you to choose to accept God's love and grace. No one else can decide for you.

Let's show we care. That's where we can do some good. Be compassionate to others and you'll find forgiveness as well. God never gives up on you. God is always with you on your spiritual journey through life. We may occasionally turn off that path, misled by a curse, but Jesus always invites us to turn back and follow the way of blessing.

The message of who Jesus is, is the most radical, beautiful and counter-cultural news the world has ever heard. It's a blessing, waiting to be shared. It's the reason we're gathered in this awkward way during this challenging time to face difficult trials. It's our "Why": We believe Jesus Christ makes our lives together better in every way. That's what draws us back every week.

Thank you for allowing Esperanza and me to be part of your narrative, your story of faith. As we look ahead at what God has planned for us together, I hope you will and see the blessings God has in store. Pass them on. You'll make lives better when you do.

To God be the glory, amen.

Let us pray silently together ...

Genesis 12:1-4 (CEB)

The Lord said to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you.”

Abram left just as the Lord told him, and Lot went with him. Now Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran.

Romans 7:15-25 (CEB)

I don’t know what I’m doing, because I don’t do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate. But if I’m doing the thing that I don’t want to do, I’m agreeing that the Law is right. But now I’m not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it’s sin that lives in me. I know that good doesn’t live in me—that is, in my body. The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can’t do it. I don’t do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don’t want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don’t want to do, then I’m not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it.

So I find that, as a rule, when I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me. I gladly agree with the Law on the inside, but I see a different law at work in my body. It wages a war against the law of my mind and takes me prisoner with the law of sin that is in my body. I’m a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this dead corpse? Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then I’m a slave to God’s Law in my mind, but I’m a slave to sin’s law in my body.