

“BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING”
Romans 5:1-11, Luke 14:7-14, I Kings 8:54-66, 9:1-9
April 14 &15, 2018 (Confirmation Sunday)

Tony Evans tells this wonderful account. He says, “When I first started traveling and speaking in other places, my kids were small so I’d go by the gift store in the airport and I’d buy a gift to bring back to them. I would buy them a blessing. I’d buy a little toy or a trinket from the gift shop like some jacks for my girls or a little car for my boys.

“On my return I would give them the gift. They would always be excited. I would always get a hug and a kiss. There would be great gratitude and thanks because I had come back with a blessing and they were excited about the blessing. What made me feel good and excited me was the fact that they were excited about the blessor. I got a hug and I got a kiss as they expressed gratitude.

“But after a while, they began to look forward to my trips. They wanted me to leave again. In other words, my kids were so into the blessings that they had lost sight of the bless-or. As long as the bless-or brought back a blessing, they were fine.

“A lot of folk want to come to church and they don’t want to mess with the bless-or. They just want the bless-or to leave behind a blessing. God has said, “Return to Me!” (Malachi 3:7). He wants us to be focused on Him” and let the blessings be the end result of our relationship with the One who blesses us.¹

God wants us to have a close relationship with Him. He is the One who provides for all our needs, gives us our strength and abilities to do great work, and He has provided us an abundance of His blessings. But it all starts with a relationship with Him. Without a personal relationship with the Lord our God, He may still bless us, but we end up just looking for the blessing without having a relationship with the One giving us the blessings.

When that happens, we have a problem, because we are more focused on the blessing than on the One blessing us. We begin to look around us and see the stuff of this world, and we

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publications, 2009] pg. 25, #42)

forget the One who has created the world and given us the things in the world. Yet, it's not the stuff of this world that brings us life, it is the One who created this world, God Himself.

We heard that in our New Testament lesson of Romans 5. Because of our sinfulness we are separated from God and have no way to reconnect with Him outside of Jesus Christ. Jesus came as God's Reconciliation Master in order that we could once more find a relationship with God. Jesus' death on the cross satisfied the penalty for sin, so each of us has a way to be forgiven and once again renew that close relationship with God. Because of God's great love for us, He wants us to be close to Him and love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And because God loves us, and we love God, He is so willing to provide abundant blessings for us so that we might live as a witness to our love for Him.

In this way, Paul tells us, "...we rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has now made us God's friends" (Rom. 5:11). When we are friends of God, we can ask Him for all that we need, and God is delighted to supply us with those blessings. It's not because we have done anything **to earn** God's blessings. Rather it is because of our relationship with God that brings us the blessings.

And that is the prayer that Solomon lifted up before the people as he dedicated the first Temple to God. Solomon had spent 7 ½ years building the Temple, and when all the building projects were finished, Solomon dedicated it to God. He prayed that God would come and abide in this place (knowing that the fullness of God could not possibly fit into such a small space) to show the world that He was with Israel. Solomon desired that the Lord God would be present with them just as He had done while the people came out of Egypt and wandered in the desert. Solomon greatly desired the Lord to be with them.

And it pleased the Lord God that His people would turn to Him and come close to Him. So He makes this great promise to Solomon, "*If you will serve Me in honesty and integrity, as your father David did, and if you obey My laws and do everything I have commanded you, I will keep the promise I made to your father David when I told him that Israel would always be ruled*

by his descendants” (I Kings 9:4-5). God wanted that close, holy relationship with Solomon and all of Israel so that He could be with them and bless them and supply them with all they needed. God wanted to be the ONLY God of the people of Israel. He is a jealous God and wants our complete devotion and worship.

So God made this promise once more to Solomon, but it came with a condition. “But if you or your descendants stop following me, disobey the laws and commands I have given you, and worship other gods, then I will remove my people Israel from the land that I have given them. I will also abandon this Temple which I have consecrated as the place where I am to be worshiped...” (9:6-7).

You see, God was the true bless-or of the people of the world. He had created it for His own glory, and wanted us, His people, to be in such a relationship with Him that we would relish His presence, protected by His power and love. He loves us so very much that He does not want anyone to miss out on the life that He has for us. So He called the people of Israel to seek after Him and Him only. He didn't want competition from any man-made image. After all they were just stone, or metal or wood with no life or power in them. The worship of these lifeless gods did not produce anything, and only distracted the people from the real GOD who had made the whole universe by the power of His word. God wanted the people to recognize that it was HE WHO BLESSED THEM with His love and goodness.

So as long as the people focused on the Lord God as their One and True God, He promised that He would be with them and be present with them in Jerusalem. God had promised Solomon very early in his kingship that now only would He provide him with wisdom, but He would also make Solomon wealthy, give him a long reign as king, and that He would keep Israel free from any enemy occupation. The whole nation would be free and benefit from God's awesome abundance IF, and ONLY IF they followed **Him alone**. Not so if they abandoned God and sought out and followed after false, lifeless, and powerless gods like the people groups around them. God was willing to abide with the people of Israel as long as they followed and

worshiped HIM only.

So God tells Solomon, “...*People everywhere will ridicule Israel and treat her with contempt. This Temple will become a pile of ruins, and everyone who passes by will be shocked and amazed. ‘Why did the Lord do this to this land and this Temple?’ they will ask. People will answer, ‘It is because they abandoned the Lord their God, who brought their ancestors out of Egypt. They gave their allegiance to other gods and worshiped them. That is why the Lord has brought this disaster on them’*” (I Kings 9:7-9).

God wants to bless us, but He will not bless us unless we rid ourselves of any other idol that may compete with our love and devotion to God alone. While Solomon worshiped the Lord God, while he sought out only the Lord God’s presence and while he obeyed all of God’s laws and commands, God was delighted in blessing him.

Wisdom poured out of Solomon’s mouth. People from countries far and near came to listen to the wisdom of Solomon. God blessed Solomon with great wealth so that he had 666 talents of gold (25 tons) coming into Israel every year in addition to other revenues that came in through taxes and tributes from other kings and governors. That is equivalent to over \$1 Billion each year! I Kings 10 tells us that everything in Solomon’s house was made of Gold. “*No silver was used, since it was not considered valuable in Solomon’s day*” (10:21). As long as Solomon worshiped God and followed His laws and commands, God was delighted to bless him like no other in the history of the world. And there were no enemies of Israel at that time. There was peace.

But Solomon turned away from the Lord, following the gods of his 700 wives and 300 concubines. These foreign women turned Solomon’s heart away from following the Lord. Solomon constructed places of worship for “*Chemosh, the disgusting god of Moab, and... Molech, the disgusting god of Ammon ... where all his foreign wives could burn incense and offer sacrifices to their own gods*” (11:7-8).

And God became angry with Solomon for breaking his covenant with God and not

following His commands, so God removed His blessings from him, even to the point that it endangered the kingdom of Israel. There would only be one tribe of Israel that would be allowed to remain in the line of David, Solomon's father, as promised by God. Israel would be divided and it would no longer be the pride of the nations.

Solomon's problem was that he no longer recognized God as the Bless-or, and he began to worship the blessing. His eyes were so focused on the riches, the women, the power and the fame that had come to him that he neglected and forgot God as the One who had supplied it all to him in the first place. And without God's blessings in his life, Solomon became a miserable man, dying not long after that.

Folks, God delights to call us His children, but when we neglect Him, when we forget Him, when we walk away from Him and disobey His commands, He becomes angry with us and removes His hand of blessing from us. When we give up on God, though He is faithful to us, God gives us up to our own way and allows us to do as we please, even to our own detriment. If we follow God, if we believe in Jesus Christ and receive Him as our Savior, and if we follow all His teachings, God will bless us and supply us with His abundance. He delights to bless those who trust Him and follow Him and obey His commands.

But if we turn from the Lord, if we focus on the stuff of this world and forget that God is the One who supplies it all to us in the first place, God will turn away from us. And we are seeing this happen in the United States, where natural disasters are devastating various states, where diseases are running rampant and uncontrolled, where Christians are becoming persecuted and Christianity is belittled and scorned. We have turned away from the ways of the Lord God, we reject the teachings of Jesus, and we turn to our own wisdom to guide us. We blatantly disobey God's laws, we reject God's teachings, we focus on amassing riches for ourselves rather than seek fellowship in the One who supplies them, and we teach our children that there is no need for God in their lives and we teach every other religion in the world except Christianity. We are following the gods of this world and we are offering ourselves and our children to the

detestable gods of humanism, abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, ethnic cleansing, sexual deviancy and genocide. We live life for today and we look only to satisfy ourselves with the stuff of this world. Is it any wonder that God has turned His face from us and begun to give us up to our enemies? Is it any wonder that God would remove His hand of blessing from us and let us go our own way?

But that's not what God desires of us. He wants us to come to Him and trust Him and follow Him and we are blessed as we follow God through Jesus Christ. We are blessed as children of God to be a blessing to those who do not know God so that they might come to know Him and follow Him and be blessed by Him. We who put our faith and trust in God through Jesus Christ our Savior are to live as dynamic witnesses to the rest of the world that they may grow envious of us and come to us seeking the Bless-or of our lives, not the blessings that we have. We are called to invite others into the feast of the King so that they also might rejoice in the Son and be blessed in His promise of eternal life.

But to do that, it demands that we, ourselves, first have a close relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. It demands that we give up on our own ways and seek after the Ways of the Lord. It demands that we diligently seek to follow all the laws and commandments of the Lord God, and teach others to do so, too. It demands that we confess the sin in our own life, seek the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and then grow close to Him so that He is pleased to once more come to us and live in us and make His presence with us. That is how we can begin to transform the world. It starts here in this place.

Today (this weekend) we rejoice in these youth that confirm their faith in Jesus Christ. As they profess their faith and trust in Jesus, may we also once more put our faith and trust in our Savior, and Teacher, and Master, and Mediator, and Changer of hearts and minds, the Only Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. Then, may we encourage and support and build up each other so that we might reach out beyond this place to invite and encourage others to come to know Jesus. May we use the blessings we have received to be a blessing to the people of the world, in Jesus'

Holy and precious Name.

Let us pray. Father, You are so good and you are an awesome God. Yet so often we forget about You and turn from You to go our own ways. We have strayed from You and focused our lives on seeking Your blessing rather than seeking You. Forgive us! Help us today to rededicate ourselves to You, to diligently seek after You and do our very best to follow Your will and Your ways. Make us brand new people in Christ Jesus so that we might witness to the world the difference faith in You makes. Guide and direct us in all our ways. This we pray in the name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN.