

Blessings and Curses

WNMC – Matins
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Lectionary Readings: Jer. 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Cor. 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26.

Verse for Reflection: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow” (Gal. 6:6).

Hymn of Response: Hymnal #543: “I long for your commandments”

It is not too difficult to find a common theme in our lectionary readings - blessings and curses or woes. I’ll define these terms a little later.

Our responsive reading in Psalm 1 introduces us to this theme: “Blessed (or happy) are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.” By contrast, “the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps 1:1, 6). Jeremiah starts boldly with a negative: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals ... Blessed are those who trust in the LORD” (Jer 17:5, 7).

And then, perhaps surprisingly, we find the New Testament using much the same language. We are more familiar with Matthew’s version of the beatitudes where the focus is on blessings. But in Luke’s summary, you have both blessings and the pronouncement of woes which can be seen as a synonym of curses. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.... (But) Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.” “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh... (But) Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep” (Lk 6: 21, 25).

We might not be very comfortable with the second part of these dualisms. We don’t like the language of woes and curses. But they are right here in our texts, so we had better pay attention!

Indeed, this language is found throughout the Scriptures. We find it in the giving of the law in the Old Testament – Moses says to Israel: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live...” (Deut. 30:19; cf. Deut. 11:26-32; 27:9-28:19; 30:15-20).

Joshua makes it a point to reinforce this message of Moses in a solemn ceremony between two mountains, Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. “And afterward he read all the words of the law, blessings and curses, according to all that is written in the book of the law” (Joshua 8:34). This theme is also found in the prophets, as we have already seen in Jeremiah (cf. Isa 57: 1, 21). The Psalmist draws this same parallel again and again (See for example, Ps. 14:4-5; 34:15-16; 37:9, 17, 28; 75:10).

Jesus repeats the basic idea of blessings and curses in a number of different ways in the Sermon on the Mount. There is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and then comes a contrast describing a wide gate and a road that is easy, but it leads to

destruction (Matt 7:13-14). Then there is the story of the wise and foolish builders. The wise man hears Jesus' words and acts on them, and his house stands firm even through hurricanes and floods. The foolish man hears Jesus' words but dismisses them as old-fashioned and irrelevant, and so doesn't act on them, and in the ensuing storms of life his house collapses, "and great was its fall," Jesus says (Matt 7:24-7).

So what is meant by blessings and curses or woes in all these verses? "Curses" are shorthand for the pronouncement of the destructive consequences of behavior that goes contrary to what God ordained. The pronouncements of blessings make reference to the positive consequences of behavior that is in keeping with God's will.

Paul gives us a summary statement of blessings and curses as found in the verse for reflection at the beginning of your order of service: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" (Gal. 6:6).

I am intrigued with the assumptions that underlie this recurring theme of blessings and curses found in Scripture. I want to briefly outline four of these assumptions.

First, we should note that it is God the Creator, who is making these pronouncements. Indeed, one often finds references to creation within the context of the giving of God's law (Ps. 19; 147; Mk 10:1-12). That is why theologians talk about "creation law" as a way of highlighting the fact that the Creator has built laws into the very fabric of his creation (cf. Ps. 119:89-91; 105:7-8). And these laws apply to every dimension of God's creation – interpersonal relationships, family, government, economics, and even farming (e.g. Prov 8; Isa. 5:8-10, 28:23-6; Mk 10:1-12; Rom 13:1).

Second, we as human beings are free to obey or disobey God's creation laws. When we obey God's creation laws, we will experience blessing, well-being, peace. But, if we disobey the laws that God has built into creation, we will experience chaos, instability, and the collapse of our human houses, because they are not built on a solid foundation. We as human beings have a choice to obey or disobey God's creation laws. We do not have a choice about the consequences that follow. We will experience either blessings or curses, shalom or chaos.

A third assumption implicit in the blessing and cursing duality is that we can know what sorts of things line up or don't line up with God's creation laws. After all, if God challenges us to obey his norms then he must give us some way of knowing what those norms are. Exploring how we come to know God's creation laws is a big question which would require another homily, or better, a 2-hour lecture. Aren't you glad that you are being spared that?

But I can't resist making two brief points in this regard. First, I don't think discovering God's creation laws is as easy as is often assumed by both theological conservatives or liberals. Second, I would remind you of Psalm 1, where we are given a hint as to how these norms are discovered. Blessings are pronounced on those who delight in God's law and who meditate on God's law day and night (Ps 1:2).

David is here underscoring some intellectual virtues that are a key to discovering God's creation law – delight in God's word, a genuine desire to know the truth, an attitude of humility which admits that we don't know it all, and the concentrated study of God's word. These virtues of the mind are necessary if we want to understand the laws built into God's creation.

Finally, we need to see God's grace in all of this. God created an ordered universe. It is not chaotic, not haphazard. Just as a child will feel secure in the care of loving parents who are consistent in the way in which they administer both praise and blame, both reward and punishment, so we as God's children will feel secure in a world where we know that we will ultimately reap what we sow, if not in this life, then in the next.

Grace is also evident in God's using the negative consequences of our actions to pull us back to the right way of doing things. God will only let violations of creation law go so far. Once we see the real consequences of going against the grain of the universe, we eventually come to our senses and change our ways.

But there is one more important dimension of God's grace that underlies this duality between blessings and curses. We begin to see this when we ask the question as to why this theme of blessings and curses is repeated so often in the bible. The reason of course is that we as human beings have a tendency to follow the wrong path. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, the road that leads to destruction is wide and easy, and there are many who take it (Matt 7:13). Our reading in Jeremiah ends with a reminder that the human heart is devious above all else and perverse (17:9). We have an inherent tendency to choose the wrong path.

But praise God, there is another message in the bible, the good news of God's grace and mercy, made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. This is of course what we remember as we celebrate the Lord's supper. And this is why Paul encourages us to examine ourselves before we eat of the bread and drink of the cup (I Cor. 11:28). This is not meant to keep us away from the Lord's table. No, we are invited to the Lord's table precisely because we are in need of God's grace.

May Jesus Christ, be honoured as we participate in the Lord's table. Amen.