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Scripture Text: 1 Peter 3:8-12

Sermon Title: *Blessing and Being Blessed in an Evil World*

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end of the document.

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Blessing and Being Blessed in an Evil World

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to 1 Peter 3:8-12, as we continue this series of sermons from this letter, written by Peter, “the Apostle of Hope,” to the believers scattered throughout Asia Minor who were facing mounting hostility and imminent persecution. Beginning in 2:11, Peter gave instructions on the need for the believers to live in submission to God-given authority, whether in government, work, or marriage. Our supreme model, or better, pattern, for this life of submission to others and trust in the Father, is Jesus Christ himself.

In today’s text, Peter draws this section to a conclusion by addressing, not just one group in the church, but the entire church family (Burdick, 1,892). We are all called to live counter-culturally, in the pattern of the Crucified, in such a way that unbelievers will come to faith in Christ (2:12; 3:1f). Here in this text Peter continues with this thought, saying that when we live a God-blessed and God-honoring life, we bring to the unconverted the blessing of a new life in Christ.

Follow as I read this text that speaks of blessing and being blessed in an evil world.

Follow as I read our text, **1 Peter 3:8-12**, and the words of Jesus, which likely inspired Peter's thoughts, from Luke 6:27-31.

The central idea in our text are contained in the words "bless" and "blessing" (9), words which we value but also use loosely and sometimes without much understanding. We say the "blessing" before we eat our meals, the pastor usually gives the benediction or "blessing" at the close of the worship service, and we bring newborn babies to the front of our worship service and pray for God's "blessings" upon them as the parents dedicate themselves to bring the child up in a way to receive God's "blessings" and to be a "blessing" throughout his or her lifetime. If we're feeling particularly spiritual, we'll conclude our letters and e-mails with "Blessings from Roger," or whomever.

The word "blessing" was not unknown in the Greco-Roman world where Peter's letter was circulated among the scattered believers. The pagans used the word "eulogeo" to mean "to publicly speak well of someone" (Jobes, 218). We get our English word "eulogy" and "eulogize" from this word, and when we give a eulogy at a memorial service we speak well of the deceased, calling to remembrance the virtues and contributions of the departed. This past week, in military cemeteries in Belgium and around the world, eulogies were given to soldiers who gave their lives in service to their countries (Armistice & Remembrance Day in Belgium and the UK and Veterans Day in the USA).

But the biblical use of "blessing" and "to bless" is not limited to what is said about someone, but means what happens to someone and what can be done by someone. It has a more active meaning in Scripture and particularly in our text. Here it means to seek God's favor for oneself and also to seek and invoke God's favor on someone else (Jobes, 218). The God-blessed and God-blessing life is another way to refer to the new life we have in Christ, eternal life that Peter says comes through the experience of a rebirth (1:3), bringing us into a relationship with God, who gives us his life and who graces our lives with his gifts, i.e. his blessings.

As we have noted, Peter is writing to encourage followers of Jesus who had, through the edict of the Roman Empire, been scattered throughout Asia Minor as literal "strangers in the world" (1:1), separated from their homelands and facing rejection and hostility from their "host" culture. But we are reminded that, as God's people, we are all strangers and aliens in this world, and have been called to follow Christ Jesus as our pattern for a cruciform, counter-cultural life. We are called to live distinctively different from this fallen world, and are to reject its way of living in self-indulgence and oblivion to God and his word, will and ways. We are called to live God-centered, God-honoring and God-pleasing lives of love for him and God-like love for others. Instead of grabbing for ourselves and competing with others for selfish gain, we follow the way of Christ, which is one of living by trust in the heavenly Father and humble, sacrificial service to others.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described the blessed life in his beatitudes, which give the characteristics that bring God's blessings—poverty of spirit, grief over sin, and humility. Also the blessed are those who hunger and thirst for

righteousness, are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5:3-10). Jesus portrays this kind of life that shares his characteristics and is counter-cultural to our world, as it was to the evil world in Jesus' day.

Peter says, in our text for today, this is the life of blessing and of being blessed is our calling in an evil world.

Being a blessing

Peter says that we as followers of Jesus are called to be a blessing, first of all...

To the family of God

These verses address first of all our relationship to others in the church fellowship, which we have seen is foundational in Peter's thought (2:4-10). We cannot be a blessing to others nor can we receive the full measure of God's blessings in isolation from one another. In the Western "style" of Christianity today, there is a rampant and unscriptural individualism that focuses on self and ignores the needs of others and the need for genuine community that crosses social, racial and cultural barriers (See Rah, 27ff). This ungodly individualism is rampant in my home country (USA), and is fed by "seeker-friendly" churches that try to draw new "consumers/customers" by catering to all of their felt needs. People often join these churches because they provide a service that meets their or their children's desires for particular services, and when those services no longer satisfy and their desires go unmet, they look for "a more obliging group" (Jobes, 215).

Surrounded by a culture and society that was suspicious, rejecting and even hostile toward them, these "strangers and aliens" in Asia Minor no doubt sensed a much greater need for a fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ. They needed others around them, where they felt safe and accepted, which is similar to the need of many of our fellow believers today in the persecuted church and in countries that deny them freedom of open Christian worship and witness. Because this fellowship in the family of God was so important, Peter urged all of the believers to relate to one another in a spirit of unity, love and humility. He mentions qualities that are normative for any church family of God, and particularly essential for communities under pressure from a hostile culture (Blum, 238).

The NIV expresses the first admonition to the church family as "live in harmony with one another" (8). It's a command to "be of one mind" (NLT), to be agreeable with one another. This command doesn't require that we think alike and have the same opinion on every matter, but rather that we are agreeable in our spirit toward and respect for one another and being sensitive to each other's concerns (Michaels, 176). As Paul says, the way to true unity is for all of us to have the mind, the attitude of Christ, which is one of genuine love and

true servant-hood as in Philippians 2:5ff, which is the opposite of the spirit of individualism and competition with each other (Marshall, 105).

One of the unique blessings of IBC Brussels is the experience of unity amidst all our diversity. One unifier is the English language, which we all try to speak with varying levels of proficiency, either as our first, second, or third language. But language doesn't give us unity in the face of cultural, racial, national, political and denominational diversity. Only our common relationship with Christ could unite us to the place where we can fellowship, worship and serve together in a harmonious relationship with one another. Because we belong to Christ, have the same mind, spirit and attitude of service to Christ and one another and the same heritage and perspective of faith, we are united.

We are to be a blessing to one another by being sympathetic, to feel for one another as well as to actively care for each other. Sympathy involves feeling for one another, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep (Romans 12:15). For emphasis Peter also adds the words "brotherly love" and "compassion." Love isn't just cold action, but begins with an awareness and understanding of others' needs, and like the Good Samaritan, causes us to give of ourselves in practical service (Luke 10:25ff). In other words, we act and interact with one another like a true body, the Body of Christ.

A couple of weeks ago I had a mishap on my bicycle, slipping on some wet leaves and landing on my right side, badly bruising my right hip. My entire body felt the pain from that fall. Even today there's still some soreness in my knee and even my left foot, body parts that have compensated for the shift of weight distribution, and thus have also suffered from the injury to my hip.

The Body of Christ should also be painfully and sympathetically aware when one of our members is wounded or bruised from a fall. Regardless of the cause of our fellow member's pain, we should feel with and for that sister or brother. And true sympathy will lead us to become actively involved in praying for and assisting the hurting and the fallen (Galatians 6:1).

Richard Wurmland, who founded *The Voice of the Martyrs*, an organization that supports the persecuted church, visited my theology class during my seminary days. He related some of his experiences of suffering under the Communist regime in Romania, and asked us quite pointedly why we had been unaware of and thus unsympathetically involved with him and his fellow sufferers during those years. He reminded us that as parts of the same Body of Christ we should have felt pain and sorrow as we heard about and prayed for them.

This is true especially for the local church as the Body of Christ. We must feel for and respond to one another with true sympathy. Our great High Priest, Jesus, feels for and loves us with sympathy and has given us his spirit and mind to truly feel for one another (Hebrews 4:14-16). This sympathy will bear the fruit of active, caring involvement in meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are a blessing to the family of God through humility, which was demonstrated most perfectly in the self-emptying of Christ and his taking the way of the Cross (Matthew 11:29; Philippians 2:5-8). Humility is not an artificial or superficial self-denigration. As someone said, it's not thinking "meanly" of yourself. It's simply not thinking of yourself at all, but rather living for others. This is the way of finding joyful and fulfilling life (Matthew 16:24f).

Humility, living for others, was a counter-cultural value in 1st Century Asia Minor where Peter's audience lived. Greco-Roman culture held humility in disdain as a sign of weakness, shame and inability to defend one's honor (Jobes, 215). The distinctly Christian virtue of humility is the key to true unity and loving fellowship within the Body of Christ, as Paul argued to the Philippians (2:1-5). Humility is the antidote to the spirit of competition, possessiveness, and jealousy, even with our ministries through the church. Jesus found it necessary to teach humility to his competitive-minded and envious disciples on the eve before his crucifixion (Luke 22:24-30). We have to agree with John Calvin that "there is nothing which produces more discord than when we think too highly of ourselves" (Calvin, 284).

This humble, serving love in behalf of one another Jesus says will be the sign to the world that we are his disciples (John 13:34f). We are to be a blessing to the family of God and also...

To an evil world

Although sadly much of our difficulty in the Christian life comes from within the church family, in Verse 9 Peter seems to turn our attention to the outside, fallen world, a world under the influence of the Evil One. Our response to the evil and insults from the world is to be, not just non-retaliation, but to give a positive blessing to our enemies. Again, we are called to take the way of Christ himself, who overcame the power of evil through his surrender to the cross. This is God's way of stopping and reversing "the downward spiral of evil," which is only perpetuated when we respond to insults and attacks with mutual vitriol (Jobes, 218).

As followers of Jesus we are called to live not just a counter-cultural life, but a supernatural life. Only by his grace and the indwelling Spirit of Christ can we obey his command to love and do good to those who abuse us (Luke 6:27-36). The way of overcoming the world, ironically, is to surrender ourselves in loving service to the world.

It was the Spirit of Christ in him that enabled Stephen to pray for his enemies who were stoning him to death. His prayer was an almost exact repetition of the prayer of Jesus for us, his enemies, on the cross (Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34). The Spirit of Christ in us will enable us, not just to say good words about our enemies and all who speak ill of us or mistreat us. He will enable us to seek through prayer and action, God's best for them. In fact, God used the blessing of Stephen in his martyrdom and prayer for those who were stoning him to touch the heart and bring conviction and eventual conversion to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8:1).

Our response to verbal attacks and all forms of hostility is not simply to clench our teeth and restrain ourselves from striking back. That repressed anger leads only to bitterness, growing resentment and high blood pressure. Rather, we are to seek words and ways that will actually serve those who resent, insult and attack us.

A story is told by students in a Christian college of a soldier, who was a serious follower of Christ, "living in a barracks with his unit. Each evening, when he would read his Bible and pray before retiring, he was reviled and insulted by the soldier across the aisle. One night a pair of muddy combat boots came flying at the Christian. The next morning, the hostile soldier found his boots at the foot of his bed, cleaned and polished and ready for inspection. Several soldiers in this company eventually became Christians as a result of the inner strength of one who could return blessing for insult" (Jobes, 218).

Peter says we are called to this kind of life that seeks to bless, not only our fellow believers, but also our worst enemies. That kind of power to bless comes only through the Spirit of Christ, who lives in us and desires to express and do his love through us. Ours is a life of blessing and of...

Being Blessed

For the follower of Christ, it's important not only that we bless others, but also that we receive the blessings that God has for us, that we are willing to receive the favor he will shower upon us. Just as in Jesus' Beatitudes, there is the present and also the future dimension of the ways God will bless our lives, giving us his favor (Matthew 5:3-12). Being blessed...

Is our present calling

When God called us to a redeeming, transforming relationship with himself, it wasn't only to give us a place with him in eternity, but it was also to begin eternal life within us in the present moment. God delights in us and delights to bless, to graciously confer his love and favor upon us. Isaiah says that the Lord longs to be gracious to us (30:18).

Peter says this blessing is not a result of our goodness, but is our undeserved inheritance. As someone has said, we can't earn an inheritance. It's something we can only receive (Jobes, 219). So there is no room in Peter's theology for salvation or even God's goodness to us as a result of our works. He agrees with Paul that all is of grace and nothing is of works (Ephesians 2:8f).

We are blessed when we realize that God has chosen us for himself and through Christ's suffering and death, has provided for our forgiveness and new life in him (1 Peter 1:3, 18f). Peter says that our blessing others and our being blessed are inextricably connected. We are able to bless even our worst enemies because we are aware that Christ has loved us far more than we

could ever love others, and has suffered to bless us far more than we could ever suffer for others. He loved us while we were undeserving sinners and even his enemies (Romans 5:6-10).

The blessings that God gives are essentially his fullness of life within us. We learn that his life in us is all we need for life to be lived at its fullest. Living in the fullness of God's love, joy and peace is life at its maximum, even though our circumstances often bring trouble and suffering at the hands of this evil world.

In speaking of the good life with which we are blessed, Peter quotes from Psalm 34:12-16. These verses describe the follower of the Lord who seeks to live righteously and seeks the peace that comes only from a relationship with God. In that kind of a relationship, even when we have trials, we know the eyes of the Lord are upon us for our good, and that he hears and answers prayers according to his purpose for us.

In commenting on verses 10-12, Wayne Grudem writes: "To *love life* does not mean that one has a trouble-free life, either in the context of 1 Peter (for the previous verse expects 'evil' and 'reviling') or of Psalm 34 (for Psalm 34:19 concludes, 'Many are the afflictions of the righteous' before adding, 'but the Lord delivers him from them all'). It rather suggests an enjoyment of life and contentment in the life God has given, no matter what the outward circumstances (c.f., Eph. 5:20; Phil. 4:4, 7, 11; 1 Thes. 5:16-18)" (Grudem, 150).

Just as we are saved by grace through faith, so we are blessed by grace through faith, through living in the awareness of our eternal life in Christ. In the US, it's very common for people to say in parting, "Have a nice day." I had an elderly deacon in our former church who would say, "Have a nice day if you want one." We receive God's blessings if we want them and are willing to live by faith that every day can be filled with his blessings.

Commenting on Psalm 34, which Peter quotes in our text, Warren Wiersbe says, "A 'good day' for the believer who 'loves life' is not one in which he is pampered and sheltered, but one in which he experiences God's help and blessing *because of* life's problems and trials. It is a day in which he magnifies the Lord (vv. 1-3), experiences answers to prayer (vv. 4-7), tastes the goodness of God (v. 8), and senses the nearness of God (v. 18)." And Wiersbe adds, "The next time you think you are having a 'bad day,' and you hate life, read Psalm 34 and you may discover you are really having a 'good day' to the glory of God!" (Wiersbe, 83). So, to understand the present blessings we receive, we need to read the entire Psalm, which Peter quotes in part.

Is our future hope

As I noted earlier, the pagan knew how to give eulogies, which were sometimes elaborate and probably often exaggerated. These "blessings" were words of honor spoken in behalf of someone, usually who had died recently and was being eulogized and memorialized.

One of my favorite people was an elderly lady in our former church who often had a word of wisdom and who seemed to live with an eternal perspective and in readiness for being with the Lord. She loved life but also realized the brevity and uncertainty of her mortal life on earth. At our church dinners, we noticed she ate her dessert first, and she explained that since life was so uncertain, she wanted to enjoy the best first. One Sunday she left a message in an offering plate saying, "Live in such a way that the preacher will not have to lie at your funeral."

We do want our lives to leave a good legacy of our faith and for people to remember that we were saved by grace and sought to live to honor the Lord Jesus. But we know that the fullness of God's blessings awaits the consummation of the kingdom when Christ returns in judgment and with his everlasting rewards for the faithful. This will be when we receive our full inheritance (Verse 9, Matthew 5:11; 25:34; Ephesians 1:14, etc) and will be fully eulogized and blessed when we hear our Master say "Well done" (Matthew 25:21).

God is at work to bless us in this life, but also has in view to bless us throughout eternity. Present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory God has in view for us as his gracious reward for our faithfulness (Romans 8:18ff). Our present trials are achieving for us "an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

So many questions about life's trials go unanswered and continue to trouble our hearts and minds. It's important for us to weigh these present trials and unanswered questions against the glorious eternity that will more than compensate for what we suffer in this mortal life.

Conclusion:

We will discover what we say about not being able to "out-give" God being true about all of his blessings. Regardless of how much we seek to bless others, including our enemies, already we discover we cannot out-bless God. How much more will this be true in eternity!

Being blessed is our present calling and our future hope. But also it's our present choice. From these verses in Psalm 34, Peter says that the choice is ours, whether to be a blessing by turning from evil and doing good or do evil by returning evil for evil and failing to bless those who seek to do us harm. And the choice we make determines present and eternal consequences, of having the favorable eyes of God upon us to bless us and know he is listening to and answering our prayers, or to discover to our horror and loss that the face of the Lord is turned against us. To reject the way of blessing is to suffer the judgment of an offended God, who will not be mocked or ignored.

God is a God of severe mercy, who loves us intensely and will not accept our rejection of his love and blessing, whether it's the offer of forgiveness through

his Son or the subsequent offer of the outpouring of his blessing in our daily lives. We need to recover more of the reverence and fear of a holy loving God expressed in Hebrews, a God who will not let us escape his judgment if we neglect such a great salvation and ignore such blessings provided at his expense (2:3;10:30f).

Today I will pronounce a benediction. Not that I have the power to bless you. Jesus is your High Priest, and I simply pass along to you his benediction. But you must believe it and receive it for yourself. First, have you received the blessing of the free gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ and his death for you? And are you, my fellow believer, living in such a way that Christ can bless you with every blessing in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6ff)?

Let's seek to bless everyone we meet, whatever their actions and words toward us. And let's seek to receive every blessing that Christ desires to pour out on us while we make our pilgrim way through this evil, unblessed world. We simply cannot out-bless God.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What are some ways that you or others you know commonly use the words "bless" and "blessing?" From this sermon, write a definition of "bless" and "blessing."
2. What are the attitudes and actions Peter says that enable us to be a blessing to other believers? What do these characteristics say about the importance of our fellowship with a local body of believers? How can their absence threaten unity and fellowship?
3. What is our responsibility to those in the church who are experiencing difficulty? How can we be a blessing to them?
4. What is our responsibility to bless those who are hostile to us? Reflect on how you might respond to someone in your, perhaps at work, school or the community, who is causing you difficulty. What is the key to your being able to act of kindness and forgiveness toward this person?
5. In what ways do you think God desires to bless you?
6. Do you think that you have a choice in the degree to which you are blessed? Explain your answer.
7. What does our text say about the rewards that God desires to give his children in eternity?

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