

Message: “Generously Bless”

One day, a young girl was walking along a beach where thousands of starfish were washed up during a terrible storm. When she came to each starfish, she’d pick it up and throw it back into the ocean. People watched her with amusement.

She’d been doing this for a while when a man approached her and said, “Little girl, why are you doing this? Look at this beach! You can’t save all these starfish. You can’t begin to make a difference!”

The girl seemed crushed, suddenly deflated. But after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she looked up at the man and replied,

“Well, I made a difference for that one!”¹

The man looked at the girl and thought about what she said and did. Then he joined the little girl in throwing starfish back into the sea. Soon others joined, and all the starfish were saved.

Blessings have the power to change the world, one person at a time.

Did you know blessings changed the Roman empire?

More than any evangelist, pastor or leader, the generous blessings of hundreds and thousands of ordinary, everyday people who believed in Jesus made a difference.

As Michael Frost puts it, they lived “questionable lives.”²

The way they lived raised curiosity about their lifestyle and message. They surprised the empire with their unlikely ways and habits.

These ordinary believers devoted themselves to acts of kindness.

They cared for the poor and fed the hungry. They loved their enemies and forgave their persecutors. And, in the brutality of life in their time, they were the most influential people anyone had ever seen.

This was so surprising, the fourth-century Roman emperor Julian feared they might take over the empire. He saw them as outsiders, calling them Galileans. Julian saw their faith as a sickness. He saw Christians as atheists, because they didn’t follow the pagan gods.

¹ <https://www.thestarfishchange.org/starfish-tale>

² Michael Frost, *Surprise the World*, NavPress, 2016, pp.6-8

Julian was concerned because Christians' blessings were touching people's hearts and changing their lives. Julian's uncle, the emperor Constantine, had become a Christian twenty years earlier, and faith and blessings were spreading throughout the empire. But they were winning the people over faster than the leaders thought would happen, which made them uncomfortable.

The people claimed God's mercy and demonstrated it.

They welcomed everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, social relations or class. They were literally the most surprising alternative society, and their conduct raised an insatiable curiosity among the average citizens.

Blessings have the power to change the world, one person at a time.

It's no surprise that the first habit Michael Frost asks us to consider embracing is blessing. Sounds good.

But this raises the question, "What is a blessing?"

The Greek and Latin words mean "to speak well of," "praise" and "make happy." Another aspect is "to add strength to another." This implies blessing someone is building them up and encouraging them to increase their strength and well-being.

What does it mean to add strength to another? Anything which relieves their burden in life adds strength. Anything which helps them breathe more easily. Anything that lifts their spirit or alleviates their distress. It can be large or small. These are blessings. Generally, there are three different forms of blessings.

First are words of affirmation. These are words of support, approval or endorsement. This is the simplest way to bless someone. You can send a note, write an email or text words of support and encouragement. Let someone know you're noticed something worthwhile about them.

Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment."³ It's been said a word of encouragement is like oxygen to the soul. A word of affirmation helps our souls breathe more easily. This is a beautiful way to generously bless someone, whether they're close to you or not.

³ *Ibid*, p. 31

Gary Chapman includes words of affirmation as one of his five love languages. He describes them as verbal ways to communicate love. Gary also identifies the importance of empathy in blessing this way.

He said, “Encouragement requires empathy and seeing the world from someone else’s perspective. We must first learn what’s important to them. Only then can we give encouragement.

Verbally, we’re trying to say: ‘I know. I care. I’m with you. How can I help?’

We’re trying to show we believe in the person and their abilities. We’re giving credit and praise.”⁴ This is affirmation and encouragement.

Another way we build people up is through acts of kindness.

Who doesn’t feel blessed when someone does them a favor or provides some kind of practical support?

There are many ways to do so. Cutting someone’s lawn. Babysitting an exhausted couple’s kids. Helping a neighbor move to a new house. These acts of kindness literally add strength. They lighten the recipient’s load. We can be generous with our time and find creative ways to do acts of kindness for anyone.

Alcoholics Anonymous offers “Just for Today” cards, which list nine daily promises a recovering alcoholic is asked to make as part of the program. The fifth promise is, “I will do somebody a good turn and will not get found out. If anybody knows of it, it will not count.”

That’s interesting, isn’t it? I’m not suggesting you need to perform secret acts of kindness as the AA program asks, but it’s the same principle. Exercise your soul and bless others by doing them a good turn this week. It will not only bless your soul but will also provide practical assistance to another person and hopefully, over time, deepen your bonds with each other.

A third way we can add strength to someone is by giving gifts.

This is another one of Gary Chapman’s love languages, as the recipient of a gift thrives on the love, thoughtfulness and effort behind the gift. A gift can show the recipient they are known, cared for, valued and loved.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 33

And I'm not just talking about birthday or Christmas gifts.

I mean totally random gift giving. Almost everything written on love says the heart of love is the spirit of giving. A gift is a symbol of our thoughts and care.

Gifts come in all sizes, colors and shapes. Some are expensive.

Some are free. Some gifts are given for obvious reasons. A struggling single parent might appreciate a food basket, while the victim of some misfortune might value being cheered up. Some gifts are nothing more than saying, "I thought of you."

Blessings have the power to change the world, one person at a time.

Michael Frost asks us to bless at least one member of our church, and one person who is not a Christian each week. The ripple effect spreads from there. Blessings will move around our church, as we affirm, gift and do acts of kindness for each other. It also means we'll move outward to bless our neighbors in these ways, leading us to look upward to God.

A culture of blessing binds people together. It has the effect of strengthening our community of faith, while building and improving the greater community we live in.

In his book *Discover Your Mission Now*, Dave Ferguson looked at the impact of "blessers" on a local community. What he found is blessers had a great social impact. When we live unexpected lives, which includes blessing strangers, we find ourselves being questioned by our friends and neighbors, and some of those strangers. Then we have the best opportunity for sharing the hope of Christ within us.⁵

Blessings will improve the lives of those blessed *and* those giving blessings in a mutually affirming way. Having said that, there are a few words of caution. Blessing people will provide opportunities to share your faith but be careful we aren't being generous friends merely to convert someone.

We are called to bless, made to bless. This is what emperor Julian was complaining about. Jesus' followers were feeding the poor, caring for the needy and dying, and practicing benevolence toward plenty of strangers. It wasn't an evangelistic strategy.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 35

It was simply their lifestyle. It was their habit.

This was the source of the emperor's outrage: the Galileans were doing these things with no sense of personal gain in mind. We need to develop a rhythm of gift giving, time spending and affirmation sharing because it fosters a spirit of generosity, it mirrors the character of God, and it alerts our neighbors to God's loving presence.

A second word of caution is to remind you the key to blessing is the recipient feeling blessed. Our action ought to support them. If someone feels manipulated or used by our words and deeds, they aren't blessings. Giving gifts to get a return leaves a nasty taste in our mouths. It'd be like bribing someone to attend our church.

Paul's words are helpful, *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others"* (Philippians 2:3-4).

Even if no one asks us about our "Why", let's resolve to live out a habitual rhythm of gift giving, time spending and affirmation sharing. We can be humble, gentle, loving and consistent.

Bear in mind the proverb, *"If anyone loudly blesses their neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse"* (Proverbs 27:14). The act of blessing must be considerate to achieve its purpose.

All this implies blessers become students of those whom they bless. We must become attentive to the needs, fears, hopes and yearnings of our friends and neighbors to bless them in meaningful ways.

A final word of caution. Even when we craft our blessings in a way that shows support for those we bless, there's no guarantee people won't misunderstand our motives or challenge us for our faith.

Peter taught, *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander"* (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Peter insists we behave with gentleness and respect toward others, but he's under no illusion, as people may speak badly of us. Recall Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount: "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me*" (Matthew 5:11).

The key is to keep a clear conscience. If people take issue with us because of Christ, even though we've conducted ourselves with humility, gentleness and generosity, then so be it. Jesus is with us. But if people take issue with us because we are jerks, that's on us.

Please weigh these words of caution with the words of affirmation and promise. We can all live generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike lives, loving God and loving our family, friends and neighbors. This is what it means to live our faith in the open for all to see.

Blessings have the power to change the world, one person at a time.

Trust the Lord. Start small. Be generous with your blessings. And you'll be surprised at the ways you receive blessings in return.

God is good (all the time). **All the time** (God is good).

And the congregation said... amen.

Let us pray ...

Group Practice

The best way to develop new good habits is to practice. Each week, we'll take a moment to learn how to do so. Then we'll have an exercise to practice to help you improve your health, happiness and life.

The first strategy was to start with a very small habit. Or, as Leo Babauta said, "Make it so easy you can't say no." By picking an easy habit you don't need motivation to do it.

The next step is to increase your habit in very small ways. Jim Rohn says, "Success is a few simple disciplines, practiced every day; while failure is simply a few errors in judgment, repeated every day."

We've talked about the power of being 1% better before. Small improvements add up surprisingly fast, as do small declines.

Rather than trying to do something amazing from the beginning, start small and gradually improve. Along the way, your willpower and motivation will increase, which will make it easier to stick to your habit for good.

For example, how did your prayers of gratitude go? No matter how many times you prayed last week, consider how you might improve slightly this week.

This week's practice: bless three people this week. One person at church, one person outside of church and you choose the third.

Practice Close your eyes or soften them. Take a couple of deep breaths. Imagine yourself in the presence of the Spirit. Give thanks. [pause]

Ask who you might bless in our congregation and how. [pause]

Now imagine someone close to you. Ask how you might bless them. [pause]

Let's stretch a bit and imagine someone not close to you. Ask how you might bless them. [pause] Open your eyes and return to this moment.

Gracious God, thank you for life and the many ways you bless our lives. Thank you for Jesus, who showed us by example how to walk with you. Guide and direct our steps as we learn new habits. Walk with us as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, amen

Deuteronomy 15:10-11

...give generously to needy persons. Don't resent giving to them because it is this very thing that will lead to the Lord your God's blessing you in all you do and work at. Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the

Luke 6:32-36 (CEB)

"If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that. If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, why should you be commended? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. If you do, you will have a great reward. You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for he is kind to ungrateful and wicked people. Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.