



GRACE CHURCH

Bless The Lord!

Psalm 134

Grace Church | 8.20.23

We are currently living through an epidemic of bad etymology. If you have no idea what I just said, welcome to part of the problem. Etymology is the study of words: how we got them, why we use them, what they really mean. In some sense, everyone is an etymologist—any time we use a word, we rely on its ancient roots to give it meaning. What I have in mind as *good* etymology isn't just that annoying person who spits out a bunch of word facts—it's more like an acknowledgement of the power of words, a search for meaning in our words.

We are all naturally curious what words mean, and where they come from. Kids are typically better at this than adults. Kids, how many times have you heard from your parents: "We don't say that—it's not a good word". And then you ask "why?" Bad etymology is when our parents say "just because". It's also when we use without thinking words like *love* to describe both our feelings for well worn birkenstock sandals, our golden retriever, our closest relationships, and God himself. Bad etymology is a failure to realize that words are symbols, pointers, and behind the most powerful words are a whole world of reality and meaning.

In our bad etymology epidemic, one of the words we have failed to wonder at occurs all over the Bible, and once in every verse of our text this morning. That word is "bless". In our texts it is in its verb form, an *action* meaning "to confer blessing". Sadly, that word has lost most of its power. It's most commonly used as a throw-away line when someone sneezes, "bless you". In southern states, we use it as a kind of passive-aggressive insult: "bless her heart". Recently, it's become something accentuate a public display of first-world wealth, like when you post that picture of you and your friends on an expensive ski trip with #blessed.

Today marks our last sermon in the Psalm of Ascents, which we have been studying all summer. For the next two weeks we will be encouraging each other with the mission of God for our church, and then we will begin a long journey through the Gospel of Luke. But before we get ahead of ourselves, we need to tie a bow on these Psalms, which are really songs that the Israelites would sing on their way up to Jerusalem for worship. They are pilgrim songs, full of wisdom and emotion, showing us what we need to make it up the mountain to God. They are songs that transform us, prepare us, as we Christians are pilgrims, journeying the mountain of life up to God.



In this journey, we have learned to lament the hardship of the way. We have learned to depend on God, looking to him for everything we need. We have learned to work his way, to remember he is on our side, to long for his house, and even to pray that he would save us from the shame of our enemies. We have sung of his great mercy, and the great gift of unity with our fellow pilgrims. Every single one of these songs is significant on our journey as Christians—not one is unneeded.

But every journey has an end. So what is the end of our journey? How do we end well? Psalm 133 tells us. In verses 1-2, we have a call to action. Come, bless the Lord. And in verse 3, we have the resting place, the exclamation mark, what the whole journey of following Jesus is about: God's blessing. Bless God, God bless you. Pretty simple, no?

But if we want to understand these songs, if we want to understand the point of our journey, we must understand *blessing*, or to put it a more traditional way, *blessedness*. So let's be good etymologists today, shall we?

Blessedness, in its simplest form, is *divine blessing*. It's when some great power above you looks down and smiles and makes life good. It's what every religion is really after. Ancient pagans sacrificed even their own children to get divine blessing. Muslims relentlessly follow religious rituals to get it. And modern agnostics search for blessing from the culture or the economy or the political system, often being willing to sell their soul to get it. It's that feeling you get when you work hard for the grade and the teacher smiles at you. Everyone wants to be blessed.

But what if I told you that there is a blessedness that goes way beyond anything provided by Allah, Buddha, or all the approval of the world's wealthiest and famous. It's the blessedness of God, who we Christians believe to be the creator of all things, who he himself *is blessedness*. There are actually two words in the Bible to describe blessedness—one is like "rightness" or "perfection", and is only used to speak of God. The other is the blessing on our passage, the pouring out of unworthy recipients some of God's perfection. Or as the psalmist puts it: "at his right hand are pleasures forevermore". If God is the creator of everyone and everything, that the favor of God is the sweetest and most blessed place in the universe.

You were created for this blessed, favorable place. When God made the world, he smiled and said "it is good". When he created male and female, he smiled and said "it is very good." God created the world to share his blessedness, to give favor to man. Created with the blessed favor of God, we were given a purpose: to showcase that blessing to the world. "Be fruitful and multiply" God said to our parents, Adam and Eve, in the garden, "fill the earth and subdue it". What is the point of this call to action? It's to take the blessing and favor *outward*, to point back to God, to bring praise to God for his blessedness. This is what it means to be made in God's image: we are given the favor of God and then live in a way that spreads that favor, like an ambassador who brings lavish gifts from a far away land on behalf of his king and points back and says: "Isn't he great? Isn't he blessed? Come share in it!"



And this is exactly what **verse 1-2** means when we are called to *bless God*. At first, it seems ridiculous right? How could we bless God, who made everything and needs nothing? It's like the other day, when right after my 1 year old watched me put on my socks and shoes, he runs off, gets into my bottom drawer and comes back with another pair of socks. Well intentioned, but not what I need.

Blessing God is not giving something to God that he lacks, but honoring him for who he is. It's an acknowledgement of the truth of reality: that God alone is perfect and blessed above all. And listen, this is very important. Blessing God is the goal of the journey of the Christian. The point of it all is to get to the new heavens and the new earth, behold God, and crumble in awe. This is something called "the beatific vision", that the goal of the Christian is to finally see God fully and truly, in all his beauty and glory, *not* that he would suddenly become visible with our eyes, but that when we are perfect, every spiritual barrier to our worship will be thrown back. The vision is not just about comprehending God mentally, or feeling God emotionally, it is about becoming *like* God spiritually, transformed into the image of God that has been torn and broken.

Let me say it this way then: the singular point of your existence is to tell the truth about God. And the hope of the Christian is that one day, every lie will be banished and you will *see* God, feel his favor, and enter into the everlasting joy of doing perfectly what you were made to do: worship.

That is the call of Psalm 134: practice here on earth what we be played out forever in heaven. Let go of your inhibitions, lift your hands, come, and bless the Lord.

So I could end the sermon there, with the call of the text. But I know we are all in different spots. We all have *objections* or *hindrances* to selling out and worshipping God in this way. Otherwise we wouldn't need to be told to do it.

So let's spend the rest of the time seeing how this Psalm answers a few of our objections.

Objection: Blessing the Lord is for the professionals.

This Psalm has a specific context. As the last of the psalms of Ascent, you can almost imagine the pilgrims singing it as they *leave* Jerusalem. They turn back, over their shoulders and call out to the servants of the Lord, to bless the Lord. Who are the "servants of the Lord"? These are the priests, those called by God and trained to offer sacrifices in the temple.

If you know anything about Jewish priests in this time, you know that it wasn't an easy, carefree God. Priests were chosen from a specific family line, the line of Levi, and were set apart from any other work. They had to be ritually clean, and follow the laws of sacrifice to the letter or else risk



the judgment of God. They were judged more harshly, because they represented God to the people. 1 Chronicles notes on two occasions that the servants of God's house, the priests with all their functions, served day and night. There was never a point where there were not priests doing something in God's house: preparing sacrifices, singing, worshiping, making intercession for the people. The lights never went out in the temple.

So you can see how it was easy to professionalize the ministry of the priests. They are the special ones, the ones who get to come into the holiest places of God and minister to God. They are the only ones capable of truly blessing God.

Since they had such a high view of worship, it's possible that many Israelites were somewhat jealous of the priests. That may be a reason they are calling out to them in this song: do what you can do but we can't! If you are lucky enough to get to be in the presence of God night and day, then don't fall asleep, don't neglect your duty: bless God.

But it's not just ancient Israelites who were given over to the professionalization of the ministry. Most of our churches, including this one, are well staffed. There are men and women who have been to seminary, who have been called by God to special work, to lead and guide the church. Lifting them up to a professional level allows us both to idolize them and feel jealous, but also not have to feel the pressure of serving God fully. When we reserve the blessing of the Lord for the professionals, we trade intimacy with God for comfort.

Answer: You are a royal priesthood, welcomed to worship in God's house.

Yes, it is not simple to come into God's house. Yes, it requires holiness. But we don't need to be jealous of pastors or preachers or leaders in the church. Let me preach to you the good news of the gospel from 1 Peter 2:9-10,

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Jesus Christ is the final high priest of God. He never sleeps, but stands by night in the house of Lord and serves God on your behalf. But listen: he didn't live and die and rise again so that you could simply receive from him the benefits of his priesthood—he lived and died and rose so that you could join him in his priesthood. Jesus came to give you a new office, the one you were created for. He came to make all of us who follow him priests before God, more than capable of joining in the joy of proclaiming the excellencies of God. The call to bless God is not for professionals, and neither is the privilege. If you are in Jesus, the call is to you—no matter how inferior you view yourself—come bless the Lord.



Objection: I'm too tired, hurt, or underappreciated to bless the Lord.

If it's true that Jesus has made us into a royal priesthood and given us the honor of serving God, that comes with a lot of pressure. What about the days when we just don't *feel* like it?

This is one of the great difficulties of being a pastor. When I walk into worship with the people of God, it takes a concentrated effort to free my mind in order to worship God and focus on him. I'm thinking of the music, about if the liturgy matches up well with the sermon. I'm thinking about visitors, or those who are skeptical, what are they thinking about our worship? And I'm also thinking of our people—I'm aware of many of us who are broken, hurting, or suffering. Far too often this puts me in a mental or emotional state where I feel as if I'm just too tired to bless the Lord. And in **verse 1** we catch a picture of this: it's "standing" by night—attentive, not resting and absolutely not sleeping! Serving the Lord, blessing him, is not a job for those who can't handle a little physical weariness.

The other thing about blessing the Lord as a servant of the Lord is sometimes it's lonely. When you give all your attention to the glory of God, you'll start to notice that you may want some of that glory back for yourself. We are used to living for the glory, the blessing, of others. We help a neighbor in order to receive thanks, we serve one another to gain some good feeling or money in the relational bank account. One of the biggest sorrows of those who serve God and give themselves to worship is that they begin to feel unappreciated.

All of this leads to a natural dampening of our zeal for God. If no one cares, then why bother? And the natural result of that dampening and that apathy is shame. Our feelings don't match up with the picture we have of ourselves. We are supposed to be Christian, to be given to God: why is it that sometimes just opening our Bible or going to church feels like running a marathon? So we begin to doubt: am I really a good Christian? Am I really a Christian at all? Am I worthy to bless God in the first place? Is my worship just a show?

Answer: You have holy hands, lift them up!

Notice the call is to come, **verse 2**, to the "holy place". That is a high bar for those of us who are unholy. The call is to lift our hands, stained with sin. How could we, when we feel so dirty and disillusioned?

The answer to this objection is also the good news of the gospel of Jesus. Jesus knows what it is like to be tired—he had no place to lay his head. He knows what it is like to be lonely—his own friends abandoned him. He knows what it is like to be underappreciated—he was *crucified* as a



result of healing and preaching good news! Jesus knows how you feel, and he cares. He sees. He is not expecting you to be superhuman or superChristian. He is not calling you perfection, but to trust him, that he lived perfectly and died to free you from the shame of not measuring up. He did it so that you could be freed from the insecurities, unholiness, and sin that kept you from coming into the most holy of places to serve God, and in that freedom come in close, to the very throne and feet of God, and do what you were created for. He came to clothe you in honor, so much so that when the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy calls us to pray, he reminds us that we have “holy hands”.

When you don't feel like worshiping and blessing God, remember you have holy hands. And, as Eugene Peterson says, “you may not be able to command your heart, but you can command your arms”.¹ Lifting our holy hands is not some fake show—we express physically with the body God created us with what we know to be true. If blessing God is telling the truth about God, we can tell the truth, that he is holy and deserves our praise, not just with our feelings but also with our hands and our voices.

Objection: I'm unsure of what to bless God for.

Then you've come to the right place. The church are the redeemed people of God. God, the blessed one, has been so kind to them that they can literally sing of his praises forever. Look at **verse 3**. God is the maker of all things, heaven and earth. Everything is his. And his blessing is specific: it is *from Zion*, meaning it isn't just sitting in heaven but has come down the mountain. Jesus Christ is the blessing of God who came from Zion, God's city, in order to bring you back up.

There is no end to God's blessedness, and no end to his desire to bless us, so there will never be a time to run out of things to bless him for.

Answer: Bless God through gratitude for his generosity.

But why don't you just start here: bless God from the overflow of gratitude for his blessing. If you aren't sure what that is, look around. The air you breathe, the food you eat. It's not a coincidence that we say a “blessing” before we eat a meal. We aren't magically making the food healthy. We are giving honor and glory to God who deserves it and who feeds us and sustains us. Everything we have we owe to God's blessedness and generosity. One author puts it like this:

To bless God is to acknowledge gratefully what he is; but to bless man, God must make of him what he is not, and give him what he has not.²

We bless God because in Jesus he shared his blessing with us. He made us what we weren't and gave us what we didn't have.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms*



If you are still having trouble, let's practice together. Let's stand, lift our hands, and bless God together for some of his most mind-boggling blessings, which begin and end in the good news of Jesus.

Triune God, maker of Heaven and Earth, we bless you!

You made everything from nothing, you are second to none, you possess all power and authority and all gentleness and mercy, you are goodness and love, and you never change, fail, or end.

Triune God, maker of Heaven and Earth, we bless you!

You have provided us with life, purpose, and meaning. Not only that, you cause the sun to shine, the rain to pour, and the good blessings of the earth to be given to us, regardless of our acknowledgement of you.

Triune God, maker of Heaven and Earth, we bless you!

You have seen and heard us in our sin and sorrow, even in our rebellion against you, and loved us there, before we loved you.

Triune God, maker of Heaven and Earth, we bless you!

In loving us, you sent us Jesus Christ, your true Son, to take on flesh like us, to live perfectly for us, to die in judgment instead of us, to rise victorious over sin and death, and to resurrect all who believe on him.

Triune God, maker of Heaven and Earth, we bless you!

Not being outdone by anyone, you sent your very Spirit to live with us, to purify us and restore us, and to make us ready for the day when you will come back to get us, redeem all things, eternally vanquish all our enemies, wipe every tear from our eye, and welcome us to feast with you forever in unimaginable joy.

Triune God, maker of Heaven and Earth, we bless you!

