

2011 LLC Phoenix Winter Services
Congregational and Youth Evening
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“Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.” (Luke 11:28)

What does it mean to be “blessed”? For sure it means that one is very fortunate. In temporal life, it could mean having plenty in that which we cherish and enjoy in this life, such as food, home, family, friends, and sufficient wealth. We may say that we have been blessed or fortunate in our life.

Spiritual blessedness is when one is acceptable before God. There is an abundance of verses in the Bible describing this blessedness. Jesus’ opening words in the Sermon on the Mount are, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). In Psalm 32:1, it reads, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” The greatest blessing is found in Revelation 19:9, which proclaims, “Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.” This blessing carries the child of God past the borders of time into eternity. The child of God’s destination is heaven.

The Scripture portion appointed for this introduction from the gospel of Luke says, “Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.” We will first look at how God is present in His Word and through it reveals His salvation plan for sin-fallen man. Then we will consider the hearing of the Word of God and finally the keeping of the Word of God.

The Word of God

The Word of God is eternal. The prophet Isaiah proclaims: “The word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isa.40:8). It has been said that the Bible is a textbook of faith, written for this reason that man would learn how God saves sinful man. Apostle Paul writes: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

God is present in His living Word. Already in the day of Moses, God said: “I will raise them a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him” (Deut.18:18). Jesus confirms this when he enters Jerusalem for the last time: “For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak” (John 12:49). Jesus earlier taught: “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

This Word of God has been entrusted unto God’s people, to bring forth the message of repentance, forgiveness, and salvation unto the ends of the world. In Jesus’ high priestly prayer, he prays thus: “For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me....As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world” (John 17: 8, 18).

Hearing of the Word

Hearing is one of the senses we have in our natural body. It allows us to hear sounds around us and allows us to easily communicate with others. A person with no hearing, or poor hearing, may need to depend on reading lips or to communicate by reading and writing.

Just as there is natural hearing, so is there spiritual hearing. Jesus told his disciples, Blessed are your ears for they hear those things which many have desired to hear and have not heard them (Matt. 13: 17). How is it that someone hears, but does not really hear? When explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus taught: "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side" (Matt.13:19). We sometimes describe it in this way: "It fell on deaf ears."

Spiritual hearing is enlightened through God's Spirit. God opens one's understanding. When Peter went to the house of Cornelius to preach the Word of God, it is related: "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word"(Acts 10:44). God enlightened the hearts of the listeners to believe and accept the word of faith. Not only is it important to hear with our ears, but also to believe with our hearts. We sometimes call it "heart's faith." The following words also seem applicable: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Rev. 2: 7). It is important that we listen to the voice of God's Spirit that speaks in the congregation, which is the church of the living God and the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

Apostle Paul describes this word of faith: "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things!...So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Rom. 10: 14-16)

Keeping of the Word

God's children rejoice over their salvation. In the parable of the treasure hidden in the field, the finder sold all that he had so he could purchase the field. Nothing was more important than owning the treasure of the field. Jesus came to dwell in the heart of that one who sold all that he had. Christ is the treasure and the field is the kingdom. Oh, what great reason for joy! Also, Zacchaeus, the tax collector, had uncontainable joy when Jesus told him: "Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house." (Luke 19:5-6).

Paul reminds the Corinthian believers about the gospel that he had preached unto them, and how they had received it. He exhorts them to continue in this gospel and writes: "By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain." (1 Cor. 15:2) "Believing in vain" indicates that one has not kept the Word of God sincerely in their heart and has become shipwrecked in faith. God's children understand that faith is day by day and moment by moment. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may not come, but today we still endeavor to believe.

What happens when one no longer keeps the Word of God – or as the apostle says, "has believed in vain"? Sin has attached. Christian doctrine teaches that sin is the falling away of the heart from God. John writes: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and

the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (I John 2:15-16). Jesus taught that no man can serve two masters.

Society's liberal views and tolerance towards sin can cause sorrowful effects in God's kingdom. When ungodly ways of life become so commonplace in the world, it can "rub off" on God's children, and after a while it may not seem so wrong anymore. The borders of God's kingdom can become dim, and some may seek for changes in Christianity's understandings of right and wrong. Apostle Paul warned the elders of Ephesus, that of yourselves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, (or deviating from what is considered right), to draw away disciples after them. (Acts 20) God's children need to "stand fast, and hold the traditions which...have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle," as Paul writes in II Thess. 2:15.

We can review some of our "traditions which have been taught," as Paul exhorts, or doctrinal beliefs and positions of God's kingdom.

Marriage

Let's look at marriage, for example:

"Conservative Laestadianism has been called Christianity of the family. Marriage is the basis of a family. In creation, marriage is a union between man and woman and its main task is to continue bringing children into this world. It is given as a gift of God for unity of man and woman, and as a blessing and protection. It is sorrowful that more widely, the "Christian" understanding of marriage is being crumbled by the concept of neutrality between sexes. Generally thinking, society thinks marriage is just an agreement between two people - a relationship between two people in which they seek romance and free narcissism (love of, or sexual desires of one's own body). Seeking for one's own joys and lusts, guides people's lives. They try to avoid suffering and sorrows and difficulties and they forget commitments and responsibilities. They do not understand the seriousness of God's commands and sin is not seen as sin." (Olavi Voittainen - 2010 Liperi Suvisaurat)

"In the morning of the New Covenant, it was taught in the Christian congregation that, 'Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled' (Heb 13:4). The Word taught that God will judge those who break up marriages and live immorally.

Ours is a time of sexual over-emphasis. This is seen clearly, for example, in literature, in newspapers, and in music. In these, sexual life is not associated as a part of marriage. Immorality and adultery in the name of freedom are seen as natural.

The unbelieving world often uses the words of the Bible, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28), as words of ridicule to shame believing families. God's blessing of children has become a curse to many modern people. In the name of a high standard of living and personal pleasure, people have started down a road that is contrary to God's Word. Birth control is now a common practice. Pressure against our Christianity and believing married couples have at times been very strong." (Voitto Savela from "Hyvinä ja pahoina päivinä;" SRK 2002.)

Marriage is intended to be a lifelong commitment to “love one another in prosperity and adversity alike until death do you part,” as stated in our church marriage vows. When the Pharisee’s of Jesus’ time asked him if it was lawful for a man to put away his wife, Jesus said: “What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” In modern day society, there are dissolutions, annulments, divorce, and the like. All of these fall in the same category, in that they go against God’s will and intentions. Unbelief is the main root for such sorrowful actions.

Courtship With Unbelievers

Courtship with unbelievers is contrary to God’s Word. It was a sin of the first world that led to the world being destroyed. It is recorded thus: “That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose...And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart”(Gen.6: 2, 5-6). I’m sure all of us remember the time of Noah.

In the New Testament era, Apostle Paul writes: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?” (II Cor.6: 14-15). It seems that every generation of believers has needed to address this issue.

*“Sadly, the world’s persecution and ridicule can also try a child of God. The borders of God’s kingdom can become dim and cause a believer to start to look to the outside. This can result in taking part in the activities of this world, in spending too much time with unbelieving friends, and even tempt one to look for a spouse in this world. Believing parents recognize the difficult battle against this world that their children face, and it’s a battle that can also tempt the parents themselves.”
(Duane Pirness - Christmas in Zion 2010)*

Working Mothers

In recent times, the “stay at home” mothers are becoming fewer in number, as many mothers are entering the work force, often to supplement the family income. In years past, the husband would typically provide for the family’s needs (the bread winner), and the mother would keep the home. The home always felt secure around mother’s presence. Now it may happen that both husband and wife work away from the home and the children are cared for by others. Each family needs to prayerfully consider what works out best for their situation.

The importance of a mother’s career could become so great that the couple is tempted to practice birth control through methods such as abstinence from intercourse on days when conception is most likely to occur, use of contraceptives, birth control medications, and medical procedures. Perhaps children would seem to be a hindrance to the couple’s ambitions in life. We already quoted from the opening speech of the 2010 Summer Services in Finland regarding the purpose of marriage: *In creation, marriage is a union between man and woman and its main task is to continue bringing children into this world.*

Working mothers in today's world have almost certainly felt society's pressure regarding "over-population," or they have been asked, "How can you afford to have so many children?" Society often does not regard "stay at home" mothers in very high esteem. In light of our topic of hearing and keeping God's Word, we should recall the words of Apostle Paul that aged women would encourage young mothers: "That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed." (Titus 2: 4,5)

"Accepting God's order of creation may sometimes seem overpowering in the midst of pressures and in the midst of a growing family. Reason battles against faith. All the same, we don't have to understand everything through reason. We don't even understand how a large tree can grow from a small seed, let alone a living human being. Could a father or mother of a large family say that the youngest of the family wouldn't have the right to live and that he wouldn't be equally valuable and important as the other children in the family? Through faith we understand that each child is a valuable and unique gift from God. Even in this matter we can trust upon God's blessings." (Petri Kulmala - "Richness of Life")

There are also special trials for those couples who have not been blessed with any children. Their fervent prayer is that God could grant them the joy of having children. They may hear troubling comments about not wanting to have any children. It's good to remember them in prayer and reach out to them.

Alternative Lifestyles

In today's world, there is a great deal of concern surrounding the gay/homosexual movement, which strives for recognition and equality and also expects others to accept their way of life as normal. People are expected to be tolerant towards that way of life in the name of having love and compassion towards one's neighbor. God's children sorrowfully note how society has become accepting of these alternative lifestyles. It is said that the Old Testament believer, Lot, was vexed in spirit over the same sins of his time.

The LLC Position Statement, "Right and Wrong," describes how we as believers understand this matter of homosexuality: *"The Bible teaches that homosexual behavior is immoral and as such is sin...God does not approve the sexual relations of partners of the same sex and He does not bless such relationships. It is with good reason that the Bible warns against this sin. The increase of homosexuality and its acceptance has always been an expression of moral decline."*

We pray that the ways of the world, with all of its glory and glamour, wouldn't become a stumbling block in our lives. In Christian doctrine, we have learned that sin is the falling away of the heart from God. In the explanation of this, it states: *"When man allows physical lusts to rule him, his sin is sensuality. When man loves the world and its treasures more than he loves God, his sin is worldliness. When man seeks his own advantage in everything, his sin is selfishness. When man admires and elevates himself and wishes to get along with only his own resources, his sin is pride."* (CD 23)

At a recent board members workshop in Ghana, Africa, one concern which came forth in regard to present day lifestyles is how many women no longer dress modestly (conservatively), but

rather exploit their sexuality with revealing (provocative) clothing and actions. This can cause many sorrows and temptations in the hearts of men. God's Word teaches that if a man looks upon a woman to lust after her, he has committed adultery with her already in his heart. One cannot help but notice when women dress in this manner. However, we don't want our flesh to rule our hearts and thoughts. We can, and should, divert our gaze in a different direction. Luther once related that we can't stop the birds from flying overhead, but we don't need to let them build a nest.

Similar trends and lifestyles have troubled God's people throughout time and throughout the world. It's important to remain watchful and in prayer. Jesus taught: "and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." On the other hand, the enemy of souls would try to tempt the believers into thinking that maybe these lifestyles are not really so bad. He hasn't changed a bit in his ways from when he first told Eve, "Has God really said...?"

Apostle Paul writes to the believers of his generation: "Ye are all the children of light and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thess.5:5-6). And from Heb. 2:1, we read, "Therefore, we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip." We battle against the three-fold enemy.

As God's children, we pray to be preserved in His grace kingdom, where our source of strength is not in us, but in the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the gospel. God, through His Son, has overcome the world as Jesus has said: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). With childlike faith, we can trust and believe that greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world. Dear brother and sister in faith, believe all sins and journey faults forgiven in Jesus Name and Blood.

Questions and discussion items:

What is the three-fold enemy?

How can we react to alternative lifestyles and keep proper love towards sinners?

"Working mothers" - what effects can it have on the home atmosphere?

How can the world's lifestyles "rub off" into a believer's life?

What does it mean to be "unequally yoked" with unbelievers?

How can we preserve faith and good conscience?