

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Flip the Blessing

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Well, welcome to National Community Church all seven campuses; shout out to our extended family online. This weekend our daughter, Summer is getting married, unbelievable. And I'm walking her down the aisle and so coming to you via video this weekend wrapping up our three part series, Double Blessing. And let me take two minutes to catch up. Week one we talked about this idea of original blessing. Blessing is God's most ancient instinct. He's not going to bless pride or greed or laziness. And so we have to position ourselves for that blessing. But make no mistake about it, God wants to bless us beyond our ability to ask or imagine. Well, last weekend we talked about the attitude of 'nattitude' oh, I mean gratitude, same difference. Unbelievable, couldn't help but wear the hat this weekend. We're one week into a gratitude challenge and so if you missed last weekend, it's too late or not.

Listen, you can catch up three gratitudes a day until Thanksgiving. And here's the bottom line whatever we don't turn into praise turns into pride. Now, the Talmud says it this way, "a man embezzles from God when he makes use of this world without uttering a blessing." And so I said it this way last week, that anything less than gratitude is grand larceny. So if we don't count the blessing, we discount the blessing. Now the Psalmist said it this way, "Bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all his benefits". And so we count our blessings, name them one by one. And a gratitude journal is a good way to start. I think practically speaking, this is the way that we take thankful thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ. And then neurologically speaking, I think this is the way that we sanctify that reticular activating system at the base of the brainstem. We make sure that that blessing makes a blip on our gratitude radar.

And so what I want to do this weekend is talk about, flip the blessing. If only I had a tee shirt to make this memorable. Actually I do. And here's the deal, having a little bit of fun with it, but this is so much more than a catchphrase for Lora and I. This has become a way of life. I think it's a decision to make. It's a habit to form. It's a mindset to establish. And so what I want to do is break this idea down, but I want to go back to square one.

After their Exodus out of Egypt the Israelites, they're wandering through the wilderness. Lots of memorable moments; 10 commandments, Mount Sinai, God makes a sidewalk through the Red Sea, serves them breakfast in bed every day called manna. But I think there's this defining moment where there is this blessing that is pronounced by the priest and it really is reminiscent of the original blessing. In Numbers six, God instructs the priests of Israel to pronounce this blessing. And I break it down in chapter four of 'Double Blessing'. Get into some of that original language, even translate it into emoji. But I love this.

May the Lord make his face to shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord turn his countenance towards you and give you peace.

Now we pronounce that blessing with the degree of frequency at NCC at the end of our services. And it's powerful in part because we are declaring the words that God prescribed. I think you have to be careful not to turn it into an abracadabra. This is not an incantation, but it is an invocation and there is a divine authority to this ancient blessing.

Now, let me connect the dots. I want to fast forward all the way to Peter's first epistle. He is writing to the diaspora, these Christians who are scattered throughout the ancient world, primarily because of persecution. Peter reminds them of who they are in chapter two verse nine. He says,

"⁹ you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession..."

Now, in the Old Testament the people did not directly relate to God. There were these intermediaries called priest, and their job was to offer sacrifices from the people to God and then pronounce blessings from God to the people. What Peter does is turn this priesthood upside down and right side out. We call it the priesthood of believers. But I wonder if we really understand the implications, the ramifications.

Your campus pastor, you've heard them pronounce this priestly blessing at the end of the service, but guess what? You're the priest. It's your job Monday to Friday to pronounce blessing on everybody that God puts in your path. And so I would suggest, that no matter what you do, maybe you're a lawyer or a teacher, Uber driver; I would add a little hyphen to your occupation. No, you are a lawyer-priest. You are a teacher-priest. You are an Uber-priest. If you are in Christ, you are part of this Royal Priesthood.

Now, here's the rest of the verse...

"That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

And so it's the job of the priest, you and me, to declare God's praises and to pronounce God's blessings. We are not one church with seven campuses, we have thousands of campuses. We don't just have seven campus pastors. We have thousands of pastors, thousands of priests. When you leave this place, you don't leave the presence of God, you take the presence of God with you wherever you go. And so your primary portfolio as a priest is to pronounce blessing.

In Matthew 10 Jesus is sending out his disciples on their inaugural mission and he gives them this counterintuitive command. He says; when you enter a home, give it your blessing. Now I want you to notice the sequence because it's significant and we'll come back to it because I think we actually do the exact opposite. But Jesus says this, if it turns out to be a worthy home, let your blessing stand if it is not, take back the blessing. Now in computer science, a default setting refers to a setting that is automatically applied to a software application. Those default settings there, the operating instructions or the operating system. I think the operating instructions that Jesus gives his disciples, it seems like the wrong default setting. I think most of us before offering someone our blessing, we do a quick moral calculation, don't we, to see if they're worthy of the blessing before we give it. But that is not the tack that Jesus takes. He leads with blessing.

Well, what does that mean? I think it starts with us checking our ego at the door. I think it's filling the gaps with positive assumptions. I think it's catching people doing right. I think it's bragging about people behind their back. I think it's adding value wherever you go. And I think it's loving everybody always.

I love the way that Dick Foth says this, "There are two kinds of people in the world." He says, "There are, here I am and there you are kind of people". The first person before they walk into a room, they just kind of internally announced, here I am. You know the world kind of revolves around them. Their ego barely fits through the door. We all know a person or two like this, but then there's this second person that before walking into a room it's about everybody else. There you are. I want this to be a, there you are church. May we check our ego at the door? May we be a church that leads with blessing?

Now the question is, does this operating system always work? I wish I could tell you it does, but it is not fail-proof because it's not foolproof. Okay? Sometimes the blessing backfires and so you flip the blessing and someone flips the bird to you, right? Listen, so be it. You can get back that blessing. In fact, Jesus said, what you do then is you shake the dust off of your feet, but it shouldn't change our default setting, we still lead with blessing.

Alright, let me switch gears. We'll flip the blessing in a few minutes, but I want to put this idea in original biblical context, if you will. The idea of double blessing, it traces back to a minor prophet by the name of Zachariah he's writing to Jewish refugees who had been in captivity in Babylon. And chapter nine, pretty prophetic, he says, your King comes to you righteous and victorious lowly and riding on a donkey on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Now, that prophecy, if you remember, is fulfilled 500 years later on a day that we call Palm Sunday as Jesus enters Jerusalem, just as Zachariah described.

Now a few verses later, he says, this, return to your stronghold, oh, prisoners of hope. Again, he's writing to prisoners of war, but he calls them prisoners of hope. And then he says this, today I declare that I will restore to you double. Now the NIV says, I will restore twice as much. The KJV says, I will render double unto thee. The NLT says, I will repay two blessings for each of your troubles. And The Message says, I am declaring a double bonus.

Now I want to be really careful right here because you cannot turn biblical principles into quadratic equations, okay. I don't think the double blessing means that you're going to experience a 200% return on every investment you make. But you know what? Sometimes it does, and I think Job is exhibit A. Now, blessing doesn't discount the pain and suffering that we experience. Job endures unbelievable setbacks, unimaginable heartbreaks. But I wanna fast forward to the last chapter of what may be the oldest book in the Bible. Job 42:10 it says this,

¹⁰ *When Job prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes. In fact, the LORD gave him twice (twice) as much as before!*

Now I think Joe, praying for his friends is incredibly significant here. And I might add with friends like this who needs enemies, right? They add insult to injury, and this is huge Job prays for them. Listen to me. Forgiveness is one habit of highly blessed people. I think forgiveness; it

can break the curse a bitterness and forgiveness has as a way of beginning a new chapter of blessing.

Now notice the specificity of this passage. It says the Lord gave him twice as much as before, but who's counting? Right? Well, I'll tell you who. The God who catches our tears in his bottle. Again, I don't think you can turn a principal into a promise, but God doesn't lose track of the things that we've suffered.

Verse 12 *"The LORD blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than the first half. "*

Now, I believe this for everybody listening to this message, the question is, do you believe it? A game is not won or lost at half time, and so I'm believing that the best is yet to come.

Now I want you to notice what Job does he takes inventory. It says;

"For now he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, 1,000 female donkeys" and a Partridge in a pear tree.

Well, I added that last part, it doesn't really say that, but I love the specificity of this inventory. I think one reason why I love it is that it's in alignment with Old Testament law. Under the old covenant if a thief was found guilty of stealing something they would make recompense by paying back twice. And so why wouldn't God hold the thief, John 10, who comes to kill, steal and destroy to that very same standard? And so Job literally takes inventory. And I think that is the first step in flipping the blessing. This is where we get down to the business of double blessing.

My first job, I was a junior in high school, was at a gas station called Quick Fill in Naperville, Illinois and I worked the cash register. The end of the day I'd put one of those long poles into the gas tank, to see how much we needed. And then once a month we took inventory. And so here's the deal. If I missed an item in that inventory, the Marlboro Lights, the Ho Ho's, the Juicy Fruit, if I missed something in that inventory it didn't get restocked and we would have some unhappy customers. I would suggest that we've got to take inventory every day. We've got to count our blessings. Again, ²*"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:"*

Well, this is so simple, but it will change your life. The double blessing, the secret to the double blessing is this. The way you get it is by giving it, we are blessed to bless and this idea is as old as the Abrahamic covenant. God doesn't bless us to raise our standard of living. God blesses us to raise our standard of giving. And it starts with a really good audit with a really good inventory with taking really good notes about the ways that you have been blessed by others. And then we flip the blessing after taking that inventory.

And so let me break this idea down a little bit more. If you're taking notes step one, taking inventory. Step two is find your signature. Let me explain what I mean by that. I think God's blessings are as unique as our fingerprint. I think God wants you to flip the blessing in a way that is as unique as you are. Again, I love what Oswald Chambers said; "Let God be as original with others as he was with you". And I think this holds true in the realm of generosity.

Barbara Glanz is a corporate trainer who does workshops for Fortune 500 companies and during one such workshop for a grocery store chain; she talked to those employees about adding a personal signature to their work. Well, one of those grocery baggers, a young man with downs syndrome got an idea, went home that night and thought, I'm going to come up with a thought of the day. I'm going to print it off, kinda cut those up, and then I'm going to put one in everybody's grocery bag that comes through my checkout lane. And so about a month later, the store manager called Barbara Glanz to kind of report back and said, "When I went out on the floor this morning, the line at Johnny's checkout was three times longer than any other line. I went ballistic yelling, get more lanes open, but the customer said, no, we want to be in Johnny's lane. We want a thought for the day." One woman said, "I used to shop once a week. Now I come here every time I go by because I want a thought for the day." The manager said this, "Johnny has transformed this store now in the floral department when they have a broken flower or an unused corsage, they go out on the floor, they find an elderly woman or a little girl and pin it on them." He said, "We're having so much fun and so are our customers." I'll add one more Oswald Chambers to the mix. He said, "it is inbred in us that we have to do exceptional things for God, but we have not. We have to be exceptional in the ordinary things."

One of my first sermons I preached about 25 years ago. I was preaching at this church and afterwards an older gentleman came up, extended his hand to shake mine and I felt something in the palm of his hand. Looked down and sure enough, it was a 20 spot. Now he called it a Pentecostal handshake and I have never forgotten that moment. He said to me; take your wife out to lunch. It was so meaningful to me. I mean, I was in seminary. We were barely making ends meet. We were eating a lot of waffles back in the day. But that little gesture just was so meaningful. You know what I've done over the years; I've given a few of those Pentecostal handshakes. Now I might add, you don't have to be Pentecostal to give that kind of handshake, okay? But you better be careful because it might turn you into one. I think what you have to do then is find a unique way to flip that blessing.

So step two, find your signature. Step three; learn other people's love languages. So here's the deal. We often give gifts that we want to receive, or is that just me, right? Like, we're pretty good at giving other people what we really want. And I would suggest that what we've got to do is make sure that we know their love language. Listen, it may not be gift-giving, it may be quality time. And so, let me offer a couple of books that may help you in this regard if you want to kind of do some homework on this. And one of them is *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. For Lora and I in our marriage and even as parents with our kids, I think learning that love language has been huge. I think another book that I've loved; John Ruhlin wrote *Giftology* another great book that kinda helps that mindset. And then one of my favorites is by my friend, he's preached at NCC before. Brad Formsma, the book is titled, *I Like Giving*. And you can even go to, ilikegiving.com and some amazing stories that will help kinda help you get more creative when it comes to generosity.

Yesterday someone sent me a four pack of Lou Malnati pizzas. That's what I'm talking about. That is someone that knows my love language. There was a note on the box. It said, "Mark and Lora studies have shown that comfort food helps parents who are giving away their children. Happy wedding weekend." Man, so thoughtful. And you know what I do? I inventory moments like that one. About a month ago, so sad, we lost our sweet, sweet dog, Mickey, 12 years old.

And you know what? We have shed a lot of tears. But it was a couple of days later that someone sent a copy of a book. It's an illustrated book 'Dog Heaven' and I have had to pick up that book a time or two. You know, what I want to do is inventory the way in which others have just blessed me.

And here's the thing I've noted, and maybe this is a step four, little things, are big things. Listen, flipping the blessing doesn't have to be something huge. I think it can be as simple as a smile. And again, we've got to think in terms of time and talent and treasure. And if I'm being honest, the hardest thing for me to be generous with is my time. I think its little acts of kindness that have impacted me along the way.

When my father in law passed away, you know that it's a blur if you've walked through grief that way; you know that you go into emotional shock and so much you forget. But one thing I do remember was someone knocking on the door asking for all of our shoes and then saying that they wanted to shine them for us. You know what, I don't even know if we needed our shoes shine. But that little act of kindness had a profound impact on us. And so I think you can make a bigger difference than you can even imagine.

And that brings us to step five. Have fun, have fun. We have friends who go elfing every Christmas. It's kind of, it's ding dong ditch with a twist. Now this couple picks a family that they want to bless and if for 12 days they stealthily deliver gifts like Ninja elves and then disappear into the night. Well, on day 12, they reveal their identity and throw a little party. And where did this idea come from? Well, the husband and we'll call him buddy got elfed as a kid. And so now their family has flipped that blessing for other people. But by the way, couple of footnotes, if you decide to go elfing.

- First the police have been called for suspect packages.
- Second, at least one child was devastated that it wasn't real elves.
- And three, make sure you have the right address.

Alright. I know that singing loud for all to hear is the way to spread Christmas cheer. But come on, let's flip some blessings. Have some fun along the way. We have this core value; love people when they least expect it and least deserve it. And I think sometimes it is stepping in during a crisis and just being there, being a shoulder to lean on. But I also think it's these little ways that we show the thoughtfulness that Jesus himself demonstrated towards other people. And so

- step one, take inventory.
- Step two find your, your signature.
- Step three, learn other people's love language.
- Step four little things. They're big things.
- And step five, have fun.

All right, let me bring this in for a landing. And I want us to flip the blessing as a church. In June of 2012 we purchased an abandoned apartment building at the corner of 28th and Q Streets Southeast. It had been boarded up for the better part of three decades. It is now the DC Dream Center where we are impacting hundreds of kids' lives, a place where hope becomes habit. Now,

on that day that we purchased that building for the back taxes I actually hopped a flight, flew to Dallas, Texas, and I spoke at a conference at Covenant Church. After I spoke pastor Mike Hayes got up and here's the deal. I had met Pastor Mike and Kathy Hayes 15 minutes before the service, so I was not expecting what happened next. He got up and said that he just felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to take an offering. And this is what he said. He said, we're going to raise \$100,000 in five minutes for National Community Church. Now I now call those kinds of blessings, ex nihilo blessings. It's the Latin word for out of nothing. It's kind of this reference to the creation moment in Genesis one but I think an ex nihilo blessing, it's a surprise blessing. It's a spontaneous blessing. It's one of those blessings that kind of comes out of right field that seems to materialize out of thin air. Well, Pastor Mike and Kathy Hayes, they pledged \$5,000 and said, we want five people to follow suit and five hands shot up. Then they said we want 25 people to give \$1,000. And then finally you asked for a hundred people to give \$500 and I'm, I kid you not. It was like a kindergarten classroom. Hands were flying up all over the place and by the time we were done, it turned into \$100,000 gift in five minutes flat. What an unbelievable blessing. I have never forgotten that moment. I took inventory and I prayed a prayer. Lord, would you give us the joy and privilege as a church of flipping this blessing for someone else?

A couple of weeks ago, the Lord stirred my spirit that this is that moment. Pastor Joshua, who has been our campus pastor at our Kingstown campus for the past seven years, felt the stirring in his spirit that the Lord was calling he and his family to plant a church in Baltimore. It will be one of our network churches. And in that moment I just felt like this is it. This is our opportunity to flip that hundred thousand dollars blessing. Now, it may take more than five minutes, but wouldn't it be wonderful if in one day all of us just gave whatever the Lord put on our hearts. And I'm, I'm telling you; Lora and I are going to lead the way. I'm going to put a website up on the screen, NCC.re/baltimore. And maybe you've read a little bit about this church plant in your Next magazine. Come on. Let's sow a seed and let's believe for \$100,000 blessings. And I'll even say this, maybe you're here this weekend. You want to give \$100,000 to this? Listen, go ahead and do it. And what we'll do is anything that comes in above and beyond that amount; we will flip that blessing for this church plant. And so I'm excited to see how the Lord is going to use this.

You know we say this a lot. We're not just trying to build a church. We're trying to bless a city. Let's not just bless this city. Let's bless the city that's about 43 miles to the North. Your generosity is someone else's miracle. Every time I see Pastor Mike and Kathy Hayes, I thank them and I tell them, listen, you sowed the first seed. They are shareholders in everything that God does in and through our Dream Center. And so let's be shareholders in everything that God has called us to in the city of Baltimore.

Alright, well let me close this message. Close this series with communion at all of our campuses. Your campus pastor is going to come and give instructions and let me say this one more time for good measure. Communion, it's a pilgrimage back to the foot of the cross. I think the cross is where God flips the script and flips the blessing. God made him who had no sin to become sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of Christ. 2000 years ago, a Roman cross was the symbol of ancient torture, but Jesus flips that script and it is now the symbol of hope and love and forgiveness. And so this is where the curse is broken. This is where the blessing begins. And

so here's what I'm believing at the end of this series, that this is the beginning of a new chapter of blessing in your life, in Jesus name. Amen.

Well, I want to invite our worship teams to come at all of our campuses and our campus pastors are going to come and give you some instructions for how we're going to celebrate communion this weekend but I want to pray God's blessing on your life. And so Lord, right now, God, I pray for a blessing as unique as we are. God, those who find themselves in a difficult circumstance, God would you bless them with your presence, with the peace that passes understanding God, even with joy unspeakable. Lord, we know that ultimately the blessing is God with us, God for us, God in us. Lord, this morning, I know that so many people are going to take that first step of faith and maybe celebrate communion for the first time, and so with the angels in heaven, we celebrate and we say, welcome to the family. In Jesus name, amen.