

Will God Bless Me if I'm Good Enough? (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

Asking for a Friend Summer sermon series

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/will-god-bless-me-if-im-good-enough/

In 2005, a new television show aired on NBC and lasted for four mediocre seasons, and recently I discovered it was available to stream online so I started rewatching it. The show is called "My Name is Earl." It's not a very sophisticated show in many respects, and I honestly don't recommend that you watch it – but it's low-brow humor makes me laugh. The entire show is based on a realization that the main character, Earl, comes to. Earl had lived a bad life; he was a thief and was focused on taking advantage of others. And he suddenly realized, "When I do bad things, why am I surprised when bad things happen to me?" So he starts trying to do good things, and he's convinced that good things start happening because of that. Earl begins basing his decisions on the concept of karma. And in a sense, karma "blesses" him.

Of course as Christians, karma isn't something that we focus on. But we can't ignore the cause-effect relationship that exists in our lives. Just the simple, common-sense kinds of things like if I stay up too late on Saturday night, I'm going to have a hard time staying awake through this sermon on Sunday morning. Or if I chose to drive too fast or too recklessly, I shouldn't be surprised when I'm in an accident. You get the idea.

And sometimes we bring that cause/effect way of thinking into our relationship with God. Which leads to today's question: "Will God bless me if I'm good enough?"

In 2016, the Lifeway Research group did a survey of Americans and asked a similar question:

- i. "Will God always reward true faith with material blessings?"
 1. 63% - Disagree
 2. 25% - Agree
 3. 12% - Not sure

Source: <https://research.lifeway.com/>

So while about 2/3s of us reject that idea, more than 1 out of 3 three Americans are at least open to the possibility that it might be true. Unfortunately, during the last 50 years or so many preachers and religious leaders have taken advantage of this way of thinking and have emphasized the "Prosperity Gospel" concept – the basic belief that if I do something for God, then God will do something good for me. Many TV evangelists have become known for this approach, and they use it as a way to manipulate people into making them rich because of it. It usually goes something like, "Send in \$10 – or more – and God will answer your prayers or bless you with a better life."

We're going to look at what the scriptures have to say about "blessings" and "being blessed", as we wrestle with the question of "Will God bless me if I'm good enough?" We'll start by looking at some ancient stories from the old Hebrew books of the Bible, and then we'll turn our attention to the New Testament and what Jesus' life and teachings say about all this.

We'll start with those two rather obscure verses from 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 that were read earlier in the service. You may recognize those verses as the basis for the book released by author Bruce Wilkinson in 2000, an international best seller that has more than 9 million copies sold: *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*.

- 9 Jabez was honored more than his brothers, and his mother named him Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." 10 Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory and that your hand might be with me and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" And God granted what he asked.

First, I'm surprised that not more of us are named "Jabez," if the naming criteria is that we caused our mothers pain during childbirth. But we see that Jabez was "honored more" than his brothers – this idea that he was "better" in some sense. And verse 10 in particular points to the fact that Jabez acknowledged God and realized that any good thing in his life would come from God. Jabez understood that God had the power to bless or to curse, and while his request in some ways seems very bold, the way in which he asked God was steeped in humility.

But what about some other Old Testament characters and how they were blessed?

- Abraham (Genesis 17) – blessed in the form of becoming "father of many nations"
- Jacob & Esau (Genesis 27) – fought over a blessing of inheritance, God's favor, and being the next family patriarch or leader
- Lessons from Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel) – stories of them living for God instead of giving into the pressures of temptation, and they were blessed with God's protection and presence

Of course, there are many, many more stories in the Hebrew scriptures about God's blessings. In fact, it's one of the most significant themes in the Old Testament. We read about various Kings who were considered "good kings" that feared and honored God, and how they were blessed with long lives or military victories. And, on the other hand, we also read about "bad kings" who didn't fear God and how they did not receive God's blessings.

If all we focus on in the Bible are these stories from the book of Genesis at the very beginning to the book of Malachi at the end of the Old Testament, one could make a very strong case that "YES – God will bless me if I'm good enough." And by "good enough," that means fearing God, honoring God, and living for God with a humble spirit. And those "blessing" would often mean material, tangible rewards like having more children, acquiring more land, and having God's protection.

But of course we can't ignore what God has to say to us through the New Testament about all of this. And first and foremost, what Jesus had to say about the idea of "being blessed" and how he showed it in his own life. And in many ways, the New Testament concept of "blessings" doesn't always look like it did in the Old Testament stories that we just thought about.

Let's begin with one of Jesus' very first sermons, the Sermon on the Mount that we read about starting in Matthew 5. But this sermon isn't contained to just one chapter; it last for three lengthy chapters and is the longest known sermon we have from Jesus. And of ALL the things that Jesus could have focused on to begin this lengthy, important message, he started with what it looks like to "be blessed."

Jesus's opening words from Matthew 5, beginning with verse 3...

Jesus said, "Blessed are the..."

- Poor in spirit
- Those who mourn
- The meek
- Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
- The merciful
- The pure in heart
- The peacemakers
- Those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness

Like he did so often, Jesus turned upside down the idea of what it meant it to live for God, or to be a Godly person. And over the centuries leading up to this point when Jesus was speaking, being a good Jew – being a person of God – meant that you were a prominent Jew; someone who kept all the laws and gained status and reputation.

It reminds me of when I was a little kid growing up in a small, country Baptist church in southern Missouri. At some point every year, there would be a special moment on a Sunday morning when people who had perfect attendance in Sunday School would receive a special pin that they would attach to the fronts of their shirts. And if they didn't miss a Sunday, they would receive a new pin every year that added onto the ones they had received previously. I was never religious enough to earn one of those pins, but I remember being awe-struck at a few members of the congregation that showed up and they had as many as 10 or 15 of those pins. They hadn't missed Sunday School in over 10 years! That was quite impressive as young child. But then as I grew a bit older and paid a bit more attention to things, I remember noticing how the character and behavior of one of those men who wore one of the longest lengths of pins on that special Sunday every year wasn't a good example of the Christian faith. My point is that we sometimes exalt certain behaviors or actions that are impressive on the surface, while we miss out on what's even more important.

And that's what Jesus is doing as he begins this long sermon by reframing what it is to "be blessed." He's saying that "being blessed" is not just about having many children, or larger herds and flocks, or even God's miraculous protection when your life is threatened. No, Jesus is saying that ANYONE who knows God and lives for God is blessed because of their relationship with God – especially those whose life circumstances are hard: those who are poor, who mourn, who are persecuted.

So, back to our question of the day: Will God Bless Me if I'm Good Enough?

If we start at the end of the question, what does it mean to be "good enough?" I encourage us to again focus on Jesus' words and life. He clearly told us to Love God – the greatest commandment, and Love People – the second greatest commandment. So if you're hung up on whether or not you're "good enough." Remember that that's all Jesus asks of us: Love God, and Love People.

And that leaves the first part of the question: "Will God Bless Me?" Throughout the scriptures – both the Old and the New Testaments, we see again and again that the answer is an emphatic YES! God wants to bless us and chooses again and again to bless us! But we need to be cautious about what we expect those "blessings" to look like. If we are only focused on getting more of this and bigger of that- only tangible, material things - then we're missing what true blessing is really about.

This is the way I look at it: I am blessed by having the opportunity to know God personally through Jesus. God blesses me by allowing me to know him personally and be involved and active in my life. For me, that's the foundation of any and every blessing.

This is how the Apostle Paul described this in the opening few lines to his letter to the Ephesian church (Ephesians 1:3):

- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...