

What does it mean to be blessed? Be careful who you ask these days! Take evangelists of the so-called “prosperity gospel” (along with its aliases of “health and wealth” and “name it and claim it” gospels). According to Joel Osteen: “God wants us to prosper financially.” Or Kenneth Copeland: “Are you settling for less than God’s best in your life...less than financial abundance?”

Make no mistake: these voices and movements are widespread and seductive. Studies are beginning to consider links between the prosperity gospel and Christian nationalism.

As always, in my biased view, it’s best to go back to the original sources for terms in Biblical texts. In the New Testament, two word groups in Greek are translated most frequently as “bless.” One may be familiar: *eulogeo*, “eulogy.” The literal meaning of this group is “speak well or good of.” When the angel declares Mary “blessed are you among women:” it is this word for blessing. It is the same “blessed” used to hail Jesus when he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The second word group brings us to the Beatitudes: *makarios*. Its earliest meanings in the wider Greek culture had to do with being free from daily cares and worries. Over time, it took on the connotation of happy. Some modern translations of the Beatitudes sometimes use “Happy are those . . .” But are the Beatitudes simply about being happy in life? Before you take that as a silly rhetorical question with an obvious “no” for an answer, consider this. Robert Schuller, of *Crystal Cathedral* fame, authored a book on the Beatitudes. Its title? *The Be-Happy Attitudes*. According to the book jacket, more than a million copies were printed. Happiness is highly marketable.

As I read the Beatitudes, “blessed’s” older idea of freedom from daily cares seems a bit more on target. Such freedom speaks to how the Beatitudes pivot from “blessed *are* they” to “they *will be*.” Jesus’ blessing invests present conditions with future’s promise that we may live now with the hope of God’s coming realm. Beyond even that, blessing encompasses more than words. As with blessings spoken at the end of worship, such words intend to become living companions as we journey in the light of God’s promises. Or, as one of my teachers put it far more profoundly:

*“A blessing is an act – by speech or gesture – whereby one party transmits power for life to another party . . . Viewed theologically, the transmission takes on the quality of the sacramental, so that more happens than can be explained.”*

***Reverberations of Faith, by Walter Brueggemann***

***For Reflection and Action:***

*If a newcomer to church asked you what it means to be “blessed,” what would you say?*

*When, and how, have you experienced yourself blessed: by God; by another?*

*By what words and gestures might the church “transmit power for life:”  
to members; to neighbors; to strangers?*