

SPECIAL MESSAGES
LIVING IN GOD’S BLESSING
James 4:1-10

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

I want to begin a miniseries of two to three Sundays here where we look at this topic of spiritual blessing – how to live in the blessing of God. Last week we concluded the book of John, talking about restoration. We looked at the example of how God restored Peter and how that’s a picture of everything Jesus came to do. He came to restore.

I shared briefly in that message how Beth and I experienced restoration in our own marriage. After that message, I felt in my heart like there is more that God wants to do on that subject. In fact, we came to a point in the first five years of our marriage where we didn’t think we were going to make it as husband and wife. My wife came to me and shared that she thought we should divorce. We talked about the D-word: divorce. I heard one pastor say, “In 50 years of marriage, we’ve never talked about divorce. Murder yes, but never divorce.” Well, we talked about divorce. I have to tell you, it was a devastating and difficult season for the two of us. God did a miracle in restoring our marriage.

I remember in this season praying this prayer. I prayed, “Lord, one day, if I die before my wife dies, and she stands at my grave, I want her to be sad.” That was my prayer, because I was pretty convinced she’d be rather happy in that particular moment, like “I’m free!”

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Now, it wasn't that in a moment of mercy God dropped a restoration bomb on us and everything went from dark to light and from bad to good. In fact, I would say that God used a number of truths (I'm telling you about this restoration from my own experience) which he taught me during that season. The power of those truths is from my perspective how God restored our marriage. What's interesting about this is that I might not say that I didn't know those truths, but if I had head knowledge of them, I certainly didn't really have heart knowledge. I didn't know them. It was as if God taught them to me for the very first time. They came to me in a life-giving way and brought restoration.

There is a scene in one of the Cinderella movies. Yay Cinderella, right? Don't you love Cinderella stories? Kristin Stewart plays Cinderella and she goes to this crippled, dark forest and everything comes to light as she passes through it. That's a picture of the gospel, bringing restoration.

In these messages, what I want to do is share those truths. I want to say that I believe if you are in a place of concern, desperation, death, darkness in any area of your life, I think these truths can be applied and practiced. I also would encourage and say they can certainly be applied in a general manner as well, just to live in the blessing of God.

Having said that, I want to tell you that I'm a little nervous about this series for a few reasons.

- 1) I prefer, we prefer – it's a value for us as a church -- to take a book of the bible and go through it and preach sections of scripture and let God speak to us from the word. That continues to be our normal practice. And this is a topical message. This is bringing a subject to you and a teaching on that subject, which we do once in a while, but this is a little bit of a departure.
- 2) I'm nervous about the topic because there is a lot of teaching on living in the blessing of God that is, quite frankly, bad teaching. It's not good, solid, scriptural teaching. As soon as you see that title, personally, I kind of associate it with the kind of thinking that can be very me-centered, and actually bring death rather than life, and take us away from God rather than closer to him. So that makes me a little nervous. I just want you to get good and nervous with me before we jump in.
- 3) The third reason that makes me nervous is because at least the birth of it and some of the sharing of it has an autobiographical element, and I obviously don't want this to be about me or about us. Just in case you were wondering, I do have my wife's permission to share this message and series.

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Can I just build faith with you for a moment before I give you the first truth? There was this moment in the darkest time in our marriage where I was praying with a group of pastors at Good News Church down in Fort Lauderdale. I was pacing. It was a big sanctuary, and I was walking, just crying out to the Lord, broken before God over the mess of my life -- and God spoke to me from Isaiah 54.

Isaiah 54 is this amazing promise to the barren person. In this ancient culture, a woman who was not married and unable to have children was disgraced and shamed. That picture is taken to share a picture of the gospel, that the barren woman will have more children than the married. The prophet Isaiah says, “Stretch out your tent pegs. Enlarge your tent.” There is this amazing prophecy of restoration. So here I am, nothing in the natural, really, to encourage me, and God awakens Isaiah 54 in my Spirit. I was just overwhelmed in that moment with hope.

Now, we were wanting to have children and we were not successful. You can see now pastorally I think, “Boy, that was foolish.” You are in a marriage that might be headed for divorce and you’re trying to have kids. But that was our plan to save the marriage – to have kids. I told you last week we got a dog and the dog was demonized, so go back and listen to that message.

Immediately, I called Beth. I tried to share that message of hope. Understandably, it didn’t have the same effect. Now, here’s why I’m telling you this. This morning, I called my 84-year-old Dad. 6:45 – he’s up. I call him. I’m sitting out here in this parking lot. And as I will on occasion do, I said, “Dad, just pray for me this morning.” He began to pray Isaiah 54. He didn’t know what I was preaching on -- promises of restoration, the barren woman will have more children than the married and her children will restore lost cities. That’s a powerful message of restoration. It’s the message of the gospel.

I will tell you this. In that moment in Good News Church, I felt like the Lord promised me that I would have children (I have six, from multiple continents) and there would be a delayed fulfillment in ministry and in this church of gospel fruitfulness. I was in faith for what I believed, and I just want to emphasize this – that it wasn’t just a divine slap on the forehead of blessing. There was truth connected to it.

So, with that introduction, let’s jump into the first truth, and that truth is this:

- I. God gives grace to the humble.

Specifically, God spoke to me from James 4:6. “But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’” This is from the 10 verses that we read at the beginning of the message. Part of the power of how God worked in my life in this season and in the

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season that followed was the power of the word of God. A phrase from scripture was just brought home to my heart in a new way and I began to see the vitality, the life of it, and the truth of it. As Hebrews 4 tells us, it began to separate and reveal in my heart. This was the impact. I felt like the Lord was speaking from this verse this truth to my heart: “Brian, if you will humble yourself, I will give you my strength. I will work for you. I will open up and pour out my favor. I will bless you if you will humble yourself.”

Notice what I did there. I did two things: 1) I filled out the meaning of grace in this verse. Grace is God’s favor. Grace is God’s strength. Grace is God’s gift to you. It is undeserved, and he pours out his help on you in your life. This is a powerful promise. You are in a desperate situation. You can’t fix it. You are chronically in financial trouble. You can’t get a job. You are in this place of brokenness. It’s not the kind of suffering that you are convinced is biblically ordained, because we know that by “blessing” here we don’t mean that everything always goes well for us. You can’t break out of it. Well, scripture gives you a promise – that he gives more grace, greater grace in your life.

That is a quote from Proverbs 3:34. Proverbs 3:34 says this: “Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.” The Message translates that first phrase: “He gives proud skeptics a cold shoulder.” It’s this attitude that says, “Yeah, I’m unemployed, but it’s the market, it’s the industry, it’s this person, it’s that boss, it’s always going to be this way, and there will never be...” instead of falling before the Lord and saying, “God, why is this area broken in my life? How am I missing what might be your provision?”

I guess the most obvious thing that you see here is that one of the things that God exposed in my life was that I was immensely proud. I’m so grateful those days are all behind me. I had this encounter. I was informally discipling a new believer. He was a man about my age and he was really enthusiastic and zealous for the things of the Lord. We would occasionally go out to lunch. As things really got difficult, I had gone to the elders and shared with them: “I think I need to resign. I don’t think my marriage is going to make it. We are in big trouble and I think it probably disqualifies me from ministry.” The elders wisely said (and some of those men are here today and their response is one of those moments of God’s mercy that changed our lives), “You know, Brian, this is not unusual. Marriage is not a given. It’s not easy. You have to work at it. Let’s get you help.” The church paid for a year of counseling. Dr. Tchividjian counseled us for over a year. Some of you knew Dr. T. back in the day. He has gone to be with the Lord.

Well, I was at lunch with this believer that I was discipling or sharing with. Here’s the picture: I’m the pastor. I’m helping him. But I began to open up and say, “You know, my marriage is in trouble.”

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He knew that. I said, “Listen, brother, I have done everything humanly possible to make this work.” I’m sorry to say this, dear, but I said something to the effect of: “This woman is impossible. You cannot imagine.” If you’ve ever been around someone who’s unhappy in their marriage, you’ve heard it. You’ve heard what I said in that moment. Just blame and junk.

So this brand new believer said to me: “Brian, of all the arrogant things I’ve heard you say, and there have been quite a few, that’s the most arrogant. You’ve come to a new height in arrogance.” I don’t know why, but it hit me like a thunderbolt. I heard it in my own words.

Now, I am describing for you an acute crisis where a stronghold was revealed. I still deal with sin, and this sin, and that is the Christian life. You have certain besetting sins. You have certain strongholds. Pride and unbelief are probably at the root of those breaches in your relationship with God and others. Sometimes God uses acute crisis, circumstances in your life, to reveal the depth of our need. I don’t want for a moment to present to you, and I don’t want to tempt my wife like I’m standing up here, saying, “Oh wow, isn’t she lucky now? I’m such a humble guy.” That’s not the point of that message.

But let me break down for you how we demonstrate pride. We demonstrate pride in the following ways. This is not comprehensive, but it’s helpful.

1. We are convinced that we are right. We say, “I am right.”
2. We seek to exalt ourselves and to get our own way. “I want to be exalted.”
3. We are mostly or completely self-focused. “I am all about me.”
4. And I am quick to see this in others and I hate it in others. “You are proud.”

That’s the self-talk. “I am right. I want to be exalted. I’m all about me. And by the way, you’re proud.” As you can imagine, I was a delight to live with -- completely unaware of how my pride, expressed through anger and other sinful issues, was bringing pain to someone I love.

It’s kind of humorous – amazing, really. All of my wife’s family knows the Lord and serves the Lord. That wasn’t the case when we got married. One or two actually came to faith here at Riverside. It’s a miracle. But they’ve heard our story, and on occasion one or two of them would come back to me later and say, “So, Brian, you would agree that you were the problem in the marriage, right? You were the whole problem?” I’m like, “No! It takes two. It was both of us.”

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But you are going to see by the time I lay out these first three or four truths this morning – this first one is the main one – that when God starts to bring restoration it really does remove the focus off everything else and put it on ourselves.

Here are some diagnostic questions to ask yourself:

1. Am I always convinced I’m right? Always have to have the last word? That’s a particular trait of my personality and my pride.
2. Am I easily and often offended? Am I defensive? (These four questions are really corresponding to the four expressions of pride that I gave on the previous list.)
3. Am I angry when I don’t get what I want?
4. Am I judging others? Am I blaming?

Those are some ways to bring a diagnosis. Maybe you are seated and you are saying, “Yeah, Brian, but I’m actually right. No, no, really. I’m right.” I’m so glad you’re here. This message is definitely for you because that’s what I said. Perhaps this will help us. It’s not just “I’m right” in the moment, because you may be right in the circumstance. It’s a disposition of “I’m always right.” It’s that my default is: “It’s about me. I’m right. I want the last word. I’m offended. And if you approach me I’m defensive.”

I think I could fill this out by taking you to various scriptures to unpack this. I believe I’m on good, solid, biblical ground here. But I want to in this message give an overview of how it fits together and encourage you that perhaps there are some circumstances, some consequences in your life that might be pointing to some areas where God wants to do restoration.

Here’s the power of the point. Here’s where faith comes in on this first point. God will help you if you will humble yourself. If you don’t (this is scary) God will fight against you. God will resist you. I thought in preparation for this message about P4H, a great ministry of restoration. And I would encourage you, when you come up against insurmountable odds and a problem that cannot be naturally solved, humble yourself before the Lord. Take the emphasis off of yourself, off of your plan, off of all of that and call out to God to help you experience his strength. Because what God has called you to is an impossible task and he loves to do the impossible. He loves to do work of restoration. If we will give him the glory, give him the credit, see our barrenness, our lack of power to do it, he loves to work in those situations.

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Now, part of what happened for me, and I want to encourage you with this, is there were two or three others truths that just kind of fell on the heels of that that filled this out for me, and I'll give them to you quickly. The second truth is this:

II. Get the log out of your own eye first.

In other words, examine yourself first (I'll look at the passage in just a moment where we get that). Get the log out of your own eye first. Then:

III. Your assessment of the situation cannot be trusted.

At the very least, your assessment of the situation cannot be trusted until you embrace gospel humility in your life. Let's go to the passage, Matthew 7:1-5. This is a masterful section of teaching that Jesus gives us.

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Jesus is masterfully saying that here you are, here's the picture, and he universalizes this. We want to say, “Well, on occasion maybe this is true,” but he universalizes it. You have a log in your eye, yet you look and say, “Look at you! You've got something in your eye!” And you can't see clearly to extract what's in the other person's eye. You are blinded by your own sin, your own fault, but you are judging another.

When God does something in your life in the area of restoration, he's going to use you to help other people. He's just going to. Some of you look at your worst moments and you have an indication of what God wants to do with you in ministry. So I've had the opportunity to sit with a number of couples over the years. The most challenging thing to do in marriage counseling is to get the wife to not be overly focused on the husband and the husband not to be overly focused on the wife. Because we all come in that situation and say, “Pastor, I just hope you'll fix her. Sort her out. Sort him out. He's a problem.”

What happened for me is there were some experiences where God really did something magnificent in my life. I'm going to show you how these three principles fit together. I had this fear

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that, "Okay, I'm going to humble myself and I'm going to examine myself and I'm going to start dealing with my pride and my failure as a husband. I'm so sorry to say this, but remember, I was married to an impossible woman, right? That was my thinking. I was thinking, "Wow, if I don't control her, if I don't force the issue, she will go to unimaginable heights of impossibility." Some of you are saying, "Yeah, I've thought that." That's the thinking.

God used two things. This is exactly what happened. This is the progression: Humble yourself before the Lord and he will strengthen you. Stop worrying about the other person. Stop blaming the circumstances. Start examining your life. Then, you'll see differently. All of a sudden you'll have a new perspective that was not even on your horizon.

As God, by his grace, began to impart that, here's what happened. First thing, we are going to this counselor. Part of the value of counseling is it provides an objective viewpoint. It's someone who is not in the middle of the mess of your life. If they build a bridge of trust, they can speak authoritatively into your life. So I, in a one-on-one session with this counselor, told him my fear. And God used him in this moment. I don't remember most of what happened in the counseling, but this I remember. He said, "Your wife is not that person. If you love her and you nurture her, she is not going to become a tyrant." Then he said something that made me laugh. He said, "Believe me. I've met some tyrants, and your wife is not that person." It had such authority.

The second thing that God used in my life was a vision. I wish I had visions all the time. I don't have visions all the time, but I had something that I'm really convinced was from the Lord. I saw a picture of my wife in a field. There were flowers and she was a little girl. She was dressed in a sundress, sitting there, and she was afraid. She was scared. It was a paradigm shifting moment for me, where I began to see the call of God on my life to nurture and bless and care for my wife. I had this picture that I don't want to describe to you of who she was, but God said, "You don't even know her. In your pride and self-orientation, just taking, taking, taking, she is living in fear in your relationship." It was a painful rebuke, but it was life-giving. It was so motivating in that it began to change my perspective.

I'm going to end with this fourth principle.

IV. Only God is God.

This is the fourth truth. I went to four years of college. I went to four years of seminary. I actually (believe it or not, as hard as this is to believe) received some awards. One was the outstanding

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student in the School of Theology. Yay me! And here I am. I come out. I come to this church. My marriage is falling apart. Things are not going well. And I told the Lord, “Lord, if my marriage fails and ends in divorce, I’ve spent eight years getting this education, I feel like you’ve called me to this -- my life is over!” I felt like the Lord spoke to me in that moment. It wasn’t an audible voice, but it was so clear. The Lord said, “Your wife is not your god. Your marriage is not your god. Ministry is not your god. I am God and I alone am God in your life.”

So you know what happens? If you are in a conflict and you invest divine qualities in that thing -- if you invest divine qualities in your child or your marriage or your job or your career -- you’ve empowered that thing now to rule your life, and it can’t be God. It just can’t. It can never do for you what God alone can do. And if it’s marriage, it’s very unattractive, because all of a sudden you are not leading, you are not doing anything in faith. You are extracting. You are taking.

All of a sudden, my language began to change – the way I communicated to my wife completely began to change. There were moments in her despair where she would say, “You know, this is never going to work and you are never going to change.” In that moment there was a conviction and an authority where I would say, “Listen, you know what? You have good reason to believe that. I haven’t done right here in this situation. But I can tell you this: I believe that God has met me, God has forgiven me, and that God has a future for me. I hope it’s with us. I love you and I want to see that restoration, but if not, I’m going on with God.” And you know what happened? She just found me irresistible at that moment. See, I told you it was a miracle.

I want to finish with this, if I might. One of the things I would tell wives not to do, from Ephesians 5, is try not to correct your husband a lot, especially in front of other people. You know, he tells a story: “Two weeks ago on Monday...” “It wasn’t Monday, it was Tuesday.” “It wasn’t that, it was this.” “It wasn’t him, it was her.” There’s a point where there’s a temptation in that exchange, where the scripture says a husband’s deep need is respect. Now, if he’s in a disposition where a relationship with Jesus hasn’t brought him to confront his pride, he can be monstrous in that, and I was monstrous in it. So I just felt profoundly disrespected in our relationship. It was all about me in my thinking.

Here’s what happened. In a matter of weeks, literally, I began to really see and repent -- I did this so imperfectly -- God just began to pour out more grace. And you know what? When you do your feeble little effort and God gives his strength, it’s awesome!

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Then there was the refrigerator magnet moment. I started praying for my wife. I started praying over her. I was getting words for her. I was just like this crazy, charismatic, faith-filled man of God. I had given her this verse: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” I made this declaration. I was sure she was like, “What in the world is going on?” So, I’m out one day, I’m at a bookstore, and I see a refrigerator magnet with this verse. “Oh, this is God! This is amazing! She’s going to love this! This is going to be so life-changing! I’m going to buy this 99 cent magnet and take it home and it’s going to change her life!” I took it home, I gave it to her, and I prayed over her. It was a prayer to end all prayers. This was words of angels, Spirit of God falling from heaven, right? It was really good. And when it was over, she gave me this little pat on the head, like, “Thanks, that was nice.”

And you know, immediately that pride, right? God in his mercy said, “There it is. You can’t do anything without expecting recognition. This thing in you – it’s all about you. It goes so deep.” Man is so fallen that our need for Jesus – we just don’t even begin to see it. That was a life-giving moment for me, because Jesus was saying, “As you get a glimpse of your need, I have more grace than your need. My grace goes higher than your sin goes deep.”

Respect. In a matter of weeks my wife started talking differently about me, completely differently. I’m telling you by the refrigerator magnet story that I wasn’t doing a really good job at this. But all of a sudden, my wife began to publicly brag about me, to an extent where it was largely false. And she meant it. You know what I said? “She’s going to be sad when I die. God has already answered this prayer.”

We are going to end here, and I want to encourage you: they go together. If you will ask the Lord to help you humble yourself, to stop examining, blaming, he will give you a new perspective and reveal to you his sufficiency as God in your life. Those are the first four principles. I hope you’ll come back next week and hear the next four.

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