

# Begin with Prayer

**B.L.E.S.S. Series, January 8 & 9, 2022 | Mark 1:12-13, 1:35-39, 3:13-15**  
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## WE ARE BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

### **Spiderman's origin story reminds us that we are blessed to be a blessing.**

I haven't seen the most recent Spiderman movie, so please forgive me if I miss something.

Spiderman's origin story has been told and retold many times, but there is a basic plotline.

Peter Parker, a high-school student with a knack for science, is bitten by a radioactive spider and develops superpowers.

At first, Peter Parker doesn't know what to do with his powers.

He has an opportunity to stop a criminal but doesn't.

Later, that criminal kills his Uncle Ben who raised Peter. That's when Peter realizes that with great power comes great responsibility and becomes a superhero.

"With great power comes great responsibility." It's a comic-book version of the concept that we are blessed to be a blessing.

### **Thousands of years ago, God taught the principle to Abraham.**

God told Abraham to go from his homeland to a new land, which that God would eventually give to him and to his descendants.

God promised to bless Abraham, and God promised to bless all the families of earth through Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham was blessed to be a blessing.

Like Abraham, we too are blessed to be a blessing.

We are blessed. Those of us who are Christians have been created, loved, forgiven, adopted, and given new hearts by God. We have been given the Holy Spirit, strength for living holy lives, and gifts for serving God now. We are promised resurrection and eternal life in the future.

We are blessed to be a blessing. Like Abraham, God plans to bless the world through us.

BLESS is an acronym that helps us think about what it means that we are blessed to be a blessing.

BLESS stands for a five-part lifestyle.

B stands for Begin with Prayer.

L represents Listen with Care.

E stands for Eat Together.

The first S means Serve with Love.

The second S adds Share Your Story.

This is the lifestyle we will be discussing for the next few weeks. It's a lifestyle commitment that guides me and one that I hope we will all consider adopting.

The BLESS lifestyle is one important way we can be a blessing.

**Today, we cover the first habit or part of the lifestyle, Begin with prayer.**

We want to begin our BLESS study together with prayer. We want to ask God to prepare us spiritually for the journey ahead.

We also want to begin our own personal BLESS lifestyle with prayer. As we'll discuss today, God's power must make the defining difference as we live a BLESS lifestyle.

And we begin each step we take as we bless others with prayer.

## BLESS IS A WAY TO IMPACT OUR NEIGHBORS FOR CHRIST

**The Bible commands us to BLESS our neighbors.**

The Bible repeatedly commands us to love our neighbors. This command is embedded in the Old Testament law, in Jesus' teachings, and throughout the New Testament.

In Luke 15, in a progressive series of parables, Jesus implies that reaching lost neighbors is the heart of God and a critical aspect of loving our neighbors. Jesus tells parables about a shepherd who lost a sheep, a woman who lost a coin, and a father who lost a son. The shepherd, the woman, and the father all search relentlessly for what they have lost. Their celebration when they find what they have lost parallels the rejoicing in heaven when lost people are found.

Lest we miss what Jesus is saying, he makes it clear in his instructions to us in **Matthew 28:19-20** before he returns to heaven. Jesus says:

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Jesus commands us to BLESS our neighbors.

**However, neighbors can be difficult.**

My wife, Tammi, and I went to a neighborhood party one time.

One of our neighbors, who is ten years older than I am, was there.

I hadn't been able to get to know him, but that night he shared some of his story openly.

He let us all know that he liked to smoke marijuana.

In fact, he assured us that he had smoked enough marijuana, that if he were to line the joints up end to end, they would be as long as the Mississippi River.

I was speechless, and I am almost never speechless.

Not all neighbors are good neighbors.

**If neighbors can be difficult but we must BLESS them, then we naturally ask: Who is my neighbor?**

Sometimes we ask, "Who is my neighbor" because we want to make the list shorter.

We aren't the first ones. In Luke 10, a Jewish religious leader asked Jesus that question.

In response, Jesus told a parable about a man who was going down a road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was robbed, beaten, and left by the side of the road.

A priest came along, saw him, and passed by on the other side of the road without helping.

A Levite also came by and stepped around the wounded man.

However, a Samaritan came along and helped the wounded man. The parable was ironic because Samaritans and Jews disliked one another in Jesus' day.

Jesus turned the question around and told the Jewish religious leader to go and be a good neighbor like the Samaritan.

If there is a boundary line inside of which people are our neighbors, Jesus pushes that boundary line outward and includes more and more people inside it.

**As we think about blessing our neighbors, it helps to think about people where we live, work, and play.**

To think about the people where we live, it may be helpful to draw a map of your neighborhood or building and write down the names of the people in each house or space, including your own.

To think about the people where we work, it may help to list people who work closely with you.

To think about the people where you play, list your hobbies and ask with whom you do each of those things.

As you think about the people where you live, work, and play, you'll recognize that you know and interact with a lot of people.

**Learning who my neighbors are leads to a second question: Where are my neighbors?**

We want to know where they are, spiritually speaking.

Some of them are actively following Jesus, some of them are far away from God, and some of them are on a journey toward God.

God sends us out to love all the people where we live, work, and play.

He particularly sends us to lost people in the places where they live, work, and play.

Where are they in their spiritual journeys? What step do they need to take next? How can we impact them for Christ?

**Particularly, we want to ask a third question: How can I BLESS my neighbors?**

This is a question we'll explore over the next few weeks.

Today we're simply thinking about how we begin. How can we begin to BLESS our neighbors?

## JESUS BEGAN WITH PRAYER

**Jesus began his ministry with prayer and fasting. Let's look at Mark 1:12-13:**

*The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

He had just been baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. He saw heaven open, the Holy Spirit descend on him, and a voice proclaim the Father's love and joy in him.

Then the Holy Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness for an experience with the Father.  
Jesus was with wild animals but safe.  
Matthew and Luke both make clear that Jesus fasted during this time.  
His being with the Father and the Spirit makes it clear as well that Jesus prayed.  
Both were critical because Satan was tempting Jesus, and he was standing against it.  
At the end, Jesus was ready. He went to Galilee and began his public ministry.  
Jesus began his public ministry with prayer and fasting.

**Jesus began his day with prayer. Let's look at Mark 1:35-39:**

*And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

Jesus had been calling disciples, exorcising demons, and healing people.  
He was working long hours, until well after dark.  
Then, very early in the morning, before sunrise, Jesus did what he needed to do to fuel his ability to do ministry with power and authority.  
He went to a place alone without any distractions and prayed.  
God the Son spoke with, listened to, and enjoyed the presence of God the Father.  
Afterward, Jesus knew exactly what to do.  
Jesus began his day with prayer.

**Jesus began his decisions with prayer. Let's look at Mark 3:13-15:**

*And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.*

Jesus had a big decision to make. Which of his many disciples would be his core followers, the ones he would send out first in his name with his message and power.  
Luke makes it clear that Jesus spent the entire night up on the mountain praying.  
Then he was ready to announce his decision. He named the twelve apostles.  
Jesus began his decisions with prayer.

**Jesus' beginning with prayer is an example for us.**

Like Jesus, we begin with prayer.  
We begin things like living a BLESS lifestyle with prayer.  
We begin decisions like whom to BLESS and when with prayer.  
We begin our days and take our individual steps in BLESSing others with prayer.  
We begin with prayer because we want fellowship with God, we want guidance and clarity, and we want the power of God to work in us and through us when we BLESS others.

## BEGINNING WITH PRAYER LEVERAGES GOD'S POWER.

### **My mentor prayed for his son for 35 years.**

My mentor was a pastor for decades.

He raised his children to become followers of Jesus.

However, his son did not make that decision as a child or teenager. He was following a different path.

My mentor and his wife were praying for their son.

When I met my mentor, I joined him in praying for his son. We prayed that his son would come to faith and start living his life for Christ. We prayed together for years.

Then when his son was 35, he became a follower of Jesus.

My mentor was nowhere around when it happened.

My mentor didn't make it happen. God's power made it happen.

Beginning with prayer leverages God's power as we seek to BLESS people.

### **Some of us naturally lean on ourselves instead of God.**

I'm one of those people. I rely on my own power, and I admit it freely.

I'm an achiever. When I'm confronted with a task, my first thought is about how I am going to complete that task. When I'm confronted with a problem, my first thought is about how I am going to solve that problem. I lean on myself instead of God.

I think many of us do that. We lean on ourselves for the answers, the work, and the power.

There's something good about taking responsibility, solving problems, and doing work.

But when it comes to saving lost people, only God can do that!

### **We don't change people. God does.**

I have prayed for lots of lost people.

I have built relationships with lots of lost people.

I have served lots of lost people.

I have shared God's Story with lots of lost people.

I haven't ever saved anybody, but God has.

We don't change people. It's not our job. God does.

### **Beginning with prayer leverages God's power.**

Frequently, it's in surprising kinds of ways.

Years ago, one of our next-door neighbors turned out to be a lapsed Christian who probably never had faith in Jesus to begin with. Enough time has lapsed that I can tell his story now.

I lived next door to him for years. I prayed for him, spent time with him, served him, and shared my story with him. He didn't even react. I was certain I had failed.

When we found out that we were moving, I went next door to tell him.

He teared up. He told me that I had changed his life.

He didn't have the words to tell me the whole story, but God's power was doing something big in his life. Beginning with prayer leverages God's power in surprising ways.

## LET'S BEGIN WITH PRAYER

### **Ask God to make our hearts right.**

As we start our BLESS journey, let's ask God to motivate us to do what it is he wants us to do. Let's ask God to break down the fears and selfishness that hold us back.

Let's ask God to break our hearts for our lost neighbors and give us the resolve to follow where he's leading each one of us.

Let's begin with prayer and ask God to make our hearts right.

### **Ask God to redeem lost people.**

I have a different prayer emphasis for each day of the week. I spend my Thursday morning prayer time praying for lost people.

On Thursday mornings, I pray for a list of lost people individually by name. I also pray in general for the lost people in our area collectively.

I ask God to point me to other lost people I am not seeing.

I ask God to raise up workers who will reach out and BLESS their lost neighbors.

And I ask God specifically for partners who will help.

Let's begin with prayer and ask God to redeem lost people.

### **Ask God to guide us.**

God shows us what to do.

He shows us who he wants us to BLESS when we ask him.

He shows us how he wants us to change our lifestyle when we ask him and listen.

He shows us what he wants us to do daily if we are willing to obey.

Thirty years ago, I started one of my days praying. While I was praying, I felt a prompt from God to pick up the telephone and call two of the teenagers in the youth group I was interning with at the time.

They were both lost, I invited them both to meet me, and they both agreed.

I told them both about Jesus, and they both prayed to accept Christ that day.

Later, I baptized them both. They were the first two people I baptized.

God really does guide us right down to the details of our days if we will ask him.

### **Too many stories aren't finished.**

There are too many lost people on my prayer list right now.

Some of you probably think to yourselves that you don't know any lost people who need to be prayed for and who need you to BLESS them.

Clearly, we don't know the same people. At times, I am overwhelmed by the number of lost people I know and am praying for. Their lostness breaks my heart.

I just pray that their stories aren't finished, that God is still going to reach them and save them.

We are surrounded by people with unfinished stories.  
New England itself is an unfinished story.

**We MUST begin with prayer.**

Let's ask God to make our hearts right as we begin our BLESS journey.

Let's ask God to redeem lost people.

Let's ask God to guide us as we BLESS people.

Let's do it today.