



THE ART OF BLESSING

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You may have missed it, but this past Tuesday was “Bullet Bill” Dudley Day. At least it was for residents of Bluefield, Virginia. The whole town was dedicating the day to 87 year old William Dudley, capping it off with a big reception at Town Hall from 1 to 3 p.m.

He earned the nickname “Bullet Bill” back in 1938, when he kicked a 35 yard field goal for the town’s high school to clinch the victory over Princeton High. It was more than a fluke: He went on to play for both the Steelers and the Redskins, and though most of you have probably never heard of him, he was named the NFL’s MVP back in 1946. He was also later voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

And now, more than 70 years after first making a name for himself in Bluefield, “Bullet Bill” Dudley returned to a hero’s welcome. You might ask, “Why now? What’s so special about this man that they would choose to honor him so late in life?” The answer is “No reason. It just needed to be done.” There’s an old saying that says, “Give me my flowers while I can still smell them.” In other words, don’t wait for the funeral when someone’s dead and gone to say what you have to say.

So it was moving to read about the effort that went into celebrating this man -- decades after his accomplishments. Not only did Bullet Bill Dudley get his own day -- the governor of Virginia sent a congratulatory letter, a film crew was on hand making a documentary, and the current coaches from his alma maters gave glowing speeches. It was a beautiful way to honor a remarkable life. The home town really came through.

In the middle of the book of Philippians, Paul wants to do something similar for a man named Epaphroditus – a local boy who made his mark. Paul tells the church at Philippi that he is going to be sending him back their way, and Paul is hoping the home town will come through and give this man a hero’s welcome. Because Paul believed Epaphroditus was worth celebrating.

Philippians 2:25-30

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was

ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.

Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Normally, Paul reserves his more personal comments for the end of his letters. He greets his friends AFTER he has worked through his main points. But here, right in the middle of the letter, he focuses on this one man, Epaphroditus.

It's always amazing to me to think of the individuals who found themselves mentioned in a letter of Paul's, and as a result ended up being remembered for all time. I'm sure Epaphroditus never imagined that getting sick on a mission trip would make him famous.

Famous may be an overstatement. Even though he gets some press time in the Bible, I don't know that too many people pay much attention to this man. I have to admit – I didn't. I've read Philippians lots of times and just kind of glossed over Paul's words about Epaphroditus. But as I said – Paul puts these comments right in the middle of his letter, which at least visually places these words near the heart of what Paul wants to say. And the more time I spent with this section, the more appreciation I had for what Paul was doing.

There's something going on here that could easily go unnoticed. It reminds me of the story of a young man who fell in love with the daughter of a rich tycoon. When the tycoon found out about the romance, he was furious, because he didn't feel the poor boy was good enough for his little princess. So he forced him to write a break up letter to his daughter.

The boy agreed to do it and wrote the following:

*The great love that I have for you
is gone, and I find my dislike for you
grows every day. When I see you,
I do not even like your face;
the one thing that I want to do is to
look at other girls. I never wanted to
marry you. Our last conversation
was very boring and has not
made me look forward to seeing you again.
I sincerely want you to understand that
I speak the truth. Believe me,
I do not care for you. Please do not think that
I am still your boyfriend.*

It was exactly what the tycoon wanted. The boy asked if he could deliver the letter in person, and since he'd done such a good job, the tycoon agreed. As he handed the letter to his girlfriend, the boy whispered in her ear, "Read every other line." When you read it that way, you discover a very different message. And the tone is dramatically different.

Sometimes there's a message beyond the straightforward reading of a text. And that's happening in our passage for today. Paul communicates a truth through his actions and tone that speak beyond the words.

Because although the letter is written to the church, I believe Paul is sending an important message to Epaphroditus himself. He is giving him an incredible blessing as he goes home. Paul is framing Epaphroditus' return in a way that will not only impact how the Philippians receive him – I believe it must have also impacted how Epaphroditus viewed himself.

I've been reading a great book this week called "The Blessing", by Gary Smalley and John Trent. The authors talk about how extremely formative it is for parents to give children their approval – what they refer to as "the blessing." It is a key way to give kids an anchor as they move out into the world on their own. The authors base their idea on the patterns they see in the Old Testament of how important it was for parents to bless their children, and what a hole it leaves when that blessing is withheld.

For example, when the patriarch Isaac was nearing the end of his life and about to die, he told his oldest son, Esau, that he was going to bless him. And he asked Esau to prepare him his favorite dinner first. No sooner had Esau left than Isaac's other son, Jacob, with some help from his mom, tricked Isaac into thinking he was Esau. So Isaac blessed Jacob by mistake.

When Esau got back and Isaac figured out what had happened, he told Esau it was too late – he'd already given what was his to his brother. Now you might think, "What's the big deal? Once he recognized his mistake, he could just correct it." But in those days, a word that was spoken was viewed as binding and irreversible. There were no takebacks. And Esau uttered one of the most heart-wrenching cries in the Bible:

Genesis 27:34, 38

"Bless me — me too, my father! ...Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" Then Esau wept aloud.

It was a devastating wound to Esau, to face life without that word of full approval from his father. Maybe you can relate to that cry this morning, because you missed out on that. Maybe you know what it's like to long for that unconditional love from your mom or dad. Far too many people have to enter adulthood without the gift of knowing that their parents accept and approve of them. And without that, we go searching for approval elsewhere. If you think about your own life, you may discover that you've been doing that – constantly hoping for that missing sense of well being, turning to people and things to fill the void. Our search takes us to all the wrong places.

But – there can be some RIGHT places. Including the church. The church can step in with the intent to bless people’s lives in meaningful ways. We certainly can’t erase the pain inflicted by dysfunctional parents. And I’m not suggesting that church can make up for lost childhood. But we can be a community of blessing rather than cursing – powerful forms of blessing that makes a difference. We can envelop people with this unconditional love the way Paul did. It is exciting to me to think of the good that can come out of a congregation that lives that way.

We would just be guessing if we tried to determine what Epaphroditus had to deal with from his childhood. He may have had great parents for all we know. All we see of him is from his adult life. But I think we’re told enough to do a little reading between the lines.

Sometime prior to the letter, the church at Philippi had taken up a collection for Paul. Epaphroditus volunteered to be the one to take it to him. Not only that – he offered to stay and help Paul. Even though Paul was in prison, he was allowed visitors who could assist him with his correspondence, provide food and medicine and clothing, as well as general support and encouragement.

No doubt it was considered a big honor to be the one chosen to go and spend time working alongside Paul. It would be like landing an internship with your biggest hero. Can you imagine having an opportunity to work with them? It reminds me of a music professor I had in college who got to go spend a summer working with Stephen Sondheim. He’s a legendary Broadway composer of shows like West Side Story, and for my professor, getting to work with him was a dream come true.

I’m sure Epaphroditus looked up to Paul in a similar way. He was such an inspiring figure that the thought of being able to work side by side with him would have been very exciting.

But then it all went terribly wrong, because Epaphroditus got sick. Not just a little sick – deathly sick. He had gone with every intention of caring for Paul, but now suddenly he finds himself needing Paul to care for him. The roles are reversed.

If that were me, I would be terribly embarrassed by the situation. Now instead of helping, I’m a burden. Here’s this man who has survived beatings and prison and shipwrecks and death threats and he’s still going. But me – I get knocked down by an illness. I feel like I’m weak physically and mentally.

Have you ever gotten ill when you’ve been on the road? All that does is make you even more homesick. And Paul hints at just how much Epaphroditus missed everyone. He longs for them. Plus he’s worried his friends might be grieving for him, since word got out that he had been close to death.

In other words, Epaphroditus is probably working through some pretty discouraging emotions. On top of not feeling good physically, he has plenty of reasons to be feeling anxiety, disappointment, loneliness and a sense of failure. And the prospect of going home isn't much comfort either. Everyone will be saying, "Poor Epaphroditus. It's so sad that he washed out. He sure didn't last long, did he?" It's the perfect setup for shame to set in.

Have you been feeling like a failure lately? I was talking with someone the other day who is going through some struggles right now, and he was comparing his life to what he had envisioned it being when he was younger, and it didn't feel good. Things had taken a different turn. You might identify with that sense as well. And Epaphroditus was in a prime spot to have that sense of failure kick in.

But Paul isn't about to let that happen. He is going to send Epaphroditus home armed with a blessing to counteract any lies he may be believing about his own self-worth. This will not become an opportunity for Satan to sideline another Christian by giving him a distorted view of himself. Paul chooses his words carefully to carry the most weight.

Now you might be thinking, "I dunno...a blessing sounds all spiritual, like something mystical a priest does. I don't think I'm cut out to do that. I'll leave that to the preachers." I want to challenge that misconception. Don't get hung up on the baggage you may have with the word blessing, because that will keep you from hearing that this is something every one of us can do. And if we look more closely at what exactly Paul said, we can see the elements we need if we are going to bless other people as well.

A blessing affirms the other person's value

You can't miss the fact that Paul thinks highly of Epaphroditus. He calls him his brother. A fellow worker. A fellow soldier. A man worth honoring and welcoming with joy. There's no slamming him as a loser for being sick. Paul doesn't tell him he should man up and quit whining about being home sick. He just sticks to affirming the things he values most about Epaphroditus.

There's a story I've shared before, but it bears repeating because it's so good and it's exactly about this. Karin's father, Lee, grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan. One day when Lee was about 12 years old, the neighbor had just bought a new tractor and brought it over for Lee and his dad to see. They had had to order it and wait for it to be delivered, so it was a big deal.

Lee wanted to get a closer look, so he stepped up on one of the big rear wheels. As he was climbing, he put his weight on the tire stem, and all of a sudden it snapped off. Tractor wheels are filled with a brine solution to make them heavy, and that stuff went everywhere. The neighbors lost valuable harvest days waiting for a replacement part to arrive. Needless to say, Lee felt terrible.

Well the next day, some visitors came to the farm. Lee's dad called him over and said, "Come here. I want to introduce you." Lee headed over with his head down. He was just sure his dad was going to bring up the accident from the day before. Instead he put his arm around him and said, "This is my son Leland. I don't know what I'd do without him. If anything ever happened to me, he could run every piece of equipment on this farm."

That's what a blessing looks like. It's when you choose to affirm someone rather than focus on their mistakes.. It's when you value them for who they are and not how well they performed.

One excellent way to do that is to think in terms of word pictures. For example, Paul called Epaphroditus a "soldier." That's a word that puts an image in your mind. You think of someone who's courageous, someone who puts their life on the line, someone who's fighting for a cause. It's a great word for getting across a point.

But it can even be simpler than that. Everyday objects can become powerful ways to visualize your affirmation for another person. For example, one day Gary Smalley, the author I mentioned, was outside playing with his daughter. She found an old clothespin and brought it to him. Gary was leaving on a business trip the next day. He took that clothespin and gave it to his wife. When she asked him what it was for he said, "You do such a great job of holding everything together when I'm out of town."

That to me is a great reminder that we don't need to wait for big, special moments to bless someone. Every day gives us opportunities to speak affirmation into someone's life.

There are these cliffs in Wales that are used as textbook examples of erosion. When you look at them, you can see where the waves have been pounding them every day for thousands of years, constantly wearing down the coastline and chipping it away.

I think life is like that for all of us – wave after wave pounds at us, chipping away at our souls. We lose a little bit of ourselves to the stress and cares that wear us down. To bless someone by reaffirming who they are is a way to replace some of what gets lost. And that needs to happen not just once in a while, but on a regular basis. Paul told the Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.

Building someone up, is like adding layer upon layer of encouragement, layer upon layer of blessing, putting back the pieces that life wears away. We want to create a culture of blessing – not simply save the idea for special occasions. Affirmation is an ongoing, daily process.

Another truth we discover in Paul's words to Epaphroditus is that **a blessing expresses unity with the other person**. Maybe your vision of a blessing is of someone superior granting favors. You picture someone kneeling before the Pope and kissing his ring to receive a word of magical empowerment, because he's a little closer to God and therefore on a higher plane than the rest of us.

Paul showed his unity with Epaphroditus in a couple of different ways that we can incorporate ourselves. The first is through **identifying with them**. Paul put himself in the same category as Epaphroditus by referring to him as my FELLOW worker and my FELLOW soldier. He didn't talk about him as if he was an underling or a tagalong.

Think about this for a minute. Paul is this high power missionary with years of experience, tons of followers and a whole resume of accomplishments. Epaphroditus was just an average guy with a weak constitution. But Paul made no distinction.

Hudson Taylor was a missionary back in the 1800s. As a teenager, he left his home in England and went to China. He wasn't having much success there, until he learned that the locals were referring to him as "the black devil" because of the big black overcoat he wore all the time.

So he did something incredibly radical for his day: He quit dressing like a gentleman from Victorian England and began wearing traditional Chinese clothes. He even shaved his head and grew a pigtail in the back like all the Chinese men from the villages were wearing. And suddenly the walls were removed and people started listening to the gospel.

Identifying with someone isn't just nice – it's the way the gospel works. That's what you call incarnation. It's the way Jesus blessed us – by becoming one of us and living right in the middle of humanity.

We take on Christ's own approach when we strip away any artificial barriers and realize we're the same as someone else. That's what Paul told the Galatian church:

Galatians 3:28

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul took things a step further in his relationship with Epaphroditus. Not only does unity identify with the other person – it **includes them**.

If you read the section slowly, you see that Paul's well-being seems tied up in Epaphroditus' well being. Paul says God had mercy on both of them by sparing Epaphroditus' life. And the anxiety Epaphroditus felt about being away from home became Paul's anxiety.

In other words, Paul isn't just saying, "We're the same, you and I." He's saying, "We're connected. My future is linked to yours. I have a stake in you doing well."

I'm not saying we need to develop some sort of unhealthy codependence where we're overly invested in one another's lives. But I am saying it's easy to say we identify with someone else and far harder to include them in how we plan our day. It's what James talked about.

James 2:15-17

For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup — where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

Paul was including Epaphroditus in his thinking. He was changing his plans and adjusting his life to incorporate this brother, to bless him by meeting his needs.

I think one of the biggest lessons to take away from Paul is that **a blessing casts a vision for the other person**. He shapes an understanding of reality that holds out a wonderful future for this man who had every right to think there was none.

As I said earlier, If I were Epaphroditus, I would have been really discouraged. Here my big dreams of being a missionary turned out to be a bust and I'm being sent home. But Paul says, "No – that's not it at all. You almost died for Christ, Epaphroditus. You risked everything. You're a hero."

What a beautiful way to help him reframe how he sees himself. The facts were all there before, but Paul hooked it into the bigger story of God's kingdom. He helped clarify the purpose and meaning behind the events. Because he saw more than just an illness – he saw suffering for the sake of Christ. He saw more than just a messenger boy in Epaphroditus, he saw a warrior heart, giving all for the cause.

What a difference perspective makes. Gordon MacDonald is a Christian author and pastor. He had a large national ministry that impacted many lives. But it all came to a screeching halt when he had an affair. It cost him his job, ruined his reputation and credibility and nearly destroyed his marriage.

He and his wife Gail went through an intense two years of counseling and healing. They surrounded themselves with a group of people to help walk them through it. And after two years, their home church held a special service of Restoration. It was an incredibly humbling and difficult thing to have your personal business dealt with in such a public way, and it was hard for them to imagine ever being restored to anything.

But in the service, their friend and mentor, Vernon Grounds got up to speak to them. And he said, "Preach the gospel of the second chance. Tell as many people as you can that there can be a second chance when the worst of failures has occurred."

Sometimes we just need an outside view from someone who can speak to what's real.

If you were raised in a family where you feel you missed out on the kind of blessing I've been talking about this morning, the thought of passing on that kind of blessing to others can be difficult. You may be hearing a voice in your head that says, "If I give someone too much praise, it's going to make their head big." "They already know how I feel." "If I focus on the good I see, they won't work on the bad." "I wouldn't know what to say."

Those are ideas that we pick up and internalize that prevent us from wholeheartedly and freely blessing other people. When we have poor role models, it can be difficult to change.

But praise God that our earthly parents aren't our true role models in this area. Our Heavenly Father is, and he's perfect at it.

Ephesians 1:3

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Jesus himself is the center of blessing. It was by sending Jesus that God affirmed our value. He gave his own Son for us to demonstrate the depth of his love.

Jesus expressed his unity with us by becoming human. What's more, he called us his friends – a mind-boggling idea that in some way puts him on equal footing with us. As we talked about last week, he humbled himself completely to bless us by being one with us.

And he casts a new vision for us, giving us a new way to see and think about ourselves. It is Jesus who makes it possible to move out of a background of lies and curses and into a future of truth and blessing.

As Christ's body, we are here to pass on that blessing. What an awesome privilege we have – to build one another up, to affirm the good God is doing and to help one another catch a vision of our place in the kingdom.