

Begin with Prayer
Matt. 22:34-39, Luke 10:25-37
Pastor Jarrett Stephens

I am so excited to begin this new series today, we are calling *B.L.E.S.S.* And I've got to tell you this may be the most simple, practical and easy to apply message series that I have ever preached.

I was inspired to do this series for a couple of reasons. First, I'm just amazed as I have driven around this area and been living here now right at a year and half...I'm amazed at the number of people that live in this concentrated area (**SHOW MAP**).

Did you know that within a 20-minute drive of the Champions Campus...I'm not talking our Jersey Village Campus or our North Klein Campus – just our Champions campus. Within a radius of a 20-minute drive, there are over 560,000 people, and that number is projected to jump to over 600,000 by 2027.

Our area is very diverse and I'm grateful that our church reflects this diversity and pray that it will more and more in the future...and just for knowledge sake, here is a chart showing the ethnic diversity that makes us the community around us – it's just interesting to take note of (**SHOW CHART**).

This past week on our Champions Campus we had nearly 3500 people on our campus, which is **WONDERFUL**, but my point in showing you this is that we still have work to do!

If our purpose in life is to glorify God and reach people who are far from him – and it is – well, just think about this in the context of where you live. Chances are **HIGHLY** likely that you live in that highlighted area we showed, and there are people in your neighborhood – nearly 600,000 of them and **MANY** don't know what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ.

As I drive around and see the number of homes...as I look at these statistics and understand that the statistics represent people – people whom Christ died for...there really is a burden on my heart and I just wonder:

- “Are we doing everything in our power to reach them?”
- “Is reaching them even a possibility?”

So, seeing the vast number of people and knowing that most don't know Christ is one reason the idea for this series began to form, but also, I was put onto a book by Pastors Dave and Jon Ferguson.

The title of the book is *B.L.E.S.S. 5 Everyday Ways To Love Your Neighbor And Change The World*. It's a simple book, but in reading it I was convinced – and I knew this was the case, the book just reinforced it that the single greatest way we can reach the world is to start with those around us.

God has given all of us a circle of influence in our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools – and the challenge is, what would happen if we became VERY intentional about sharing with them what we believe is the hope of the world – the life-changing news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, there is NO question that if you are a follower of Jesus, you desire others to follow him as well. God puts that desire in your heart at salvation. A person who has truly met Christ...experienced his mercy and grace and forgiveness...you want others to experience that as well.

George Barna who has been studying the Church and researching data for years as it relates to faith, and Christians and culture released a study in 2019. “Practicing Christians” were given this statement: “Part of my faith means being a witness for Jesus” – 96% said they “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed”.

We ALL know we should be sharing our faith, and I believe MOST of us WANT to share our faith – the reality is though – on a routine, consistent basis MOST of us don’t share our faith.

In fact, talking about statistics here, this is from a Lifeway Research study...this is interesting...they polled 2,000 unchurched Americans:

- 47% said they would be open to having a conversation about faith and religious matters...
- 79% said they don’t mind having a conversation with a friend...someone they know...
- But 29% (only 3 in 10) said that a Christian has ever shared with them one on one how they could become a Christian...

In other words, we have A LOT of people that are willing to listen and have a conversation about spiritual matters, but not so many Christians willing to share and have that conversation.

And I don’t bring this up to guilt us...MOST of us know we could be doing better in this area of our lives – we KNOW we need to be sharing Jesus more – but for a variety of reasons, we simply choose not to AND this is what this series is all about.

If I didn’t rip the series title from the book, I would have called it: *Sharing Jesus For Dummies* – you’ve seen those books that take something complex and break it down so that anyone can understand it!

Well, that’s what I want this series to be about. I want to take what many of us see as complex and difficult (sharing our faith) and break it down, and B.L.E.S.S. is going to help us do just this.

Now, you all are not dummies...I KNOW that! I'm looking at Houston's best and brightest right here! However, I do think we ALL have a tendency to make sharing our faith harder than it really is.

Illus. Landry - This past week, Landry, one of my 10 year olds saw me reading through the B.L.E.S.S. book. And she asked me what it was about, so I told her it's about telling your neighbors about Jesus. She looked at me with this quizzical look and said, "that's a big book, dad." I said, "what do you mean?" She said telling people about Jesus isn't that hard!"

And she's right! And I think this book...and this study is really going to help. Let me begin by telling you the premise and outlining the B.L.E.S.S. acronym.

The premise is that sharing Jesus in the context of real friendships should be the easiest conversation to have in the world and it is the easiest way to change the world.

The difficulty is...the longer we are Christians, the less non-Christian friends we have – it's just a reality.

Oh, we have non-Christian acquaintances...we have non-Christians that we work with, go to school with and live right beside us – but they are just that – they are acquaintances – not real friends – yet we see them every day.

And it's no mistake that God has put them:

- in the cubicle next to us...
- in the home beside us...
- they are a classmate that sits right in front of us...
- a server that waits on us at the restaurant we frequent every week...
- the hairstylist that cuts our hair each month OR every two weeks in my case (don't think that I'm NOT all over this one in my life!)

And God has put them in our life to share with them. They will be open to it as we have seen, if there's a genuine friendship and B.L.E.S.S. puts us on a path to initiating and growing that friendship.

Now, this series – and it's just three weeks, but I'm praying it will be the beginning of something special for our church as we consider BLESSING others. And here is what B.L.E.S.S. stands for:

B – Begin with prayer (this is what we are talking about today)

L – Listen

E – Eat

S – Serve

S – Share

Makes sense that if we want to love our neighbor and change the world, it begins in prayer.

- Prayer is what gives us the heart of God...
- Prayer is what makes us sensitive to the Holy Spirit...
- Prayer is what gives us courage to live by faith...
- Prayer is what helps us to even see our neighbor or give us a desire to love our neighbor...

Prayer and sharing our faith (if there is to be any power in it whatsoever) must go hand in hand.

And so, let me ask this question: On a piece of paper, let's all participate if able. I'll give you this image on the screen (**SHOW IMAGE**), and I want you to fill in the names of those that surround you.

Now, it may not be your actual neighbor...students, you may want to take a certain class you are in or team you play on...adults, this may be a work thing PLUS a neighbor thing for you. It can be a combination of both.

In fact, this will be a good time to look at the scripture and see what it says about our neighbor. We know that loving our neighbor is important. Jesus speaking...this has been called the Great Commandment:

Matt. 22:34-39 – “But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (This was our Chasing Sanity worldview series) ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Now, maybe you are like another lawyer who came to Jesus and wanted clarity on who is neighbor was! What is it about lawyers?

Do you remember the story of the Good Samaritan? We'll base out of Luke 10 in the rest of our time together. This story may help shed some light on who you need to write down on your piece of paper there.

Luke 10:25-37 – “And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other

side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back."

³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

So, let's look at our sheet of paper again. I want you to look at this, and fill in the names of "neighbors" – and for our purposes and the purposes of this BLESS series, I want you to fill in the names of "neighbors" who don't know Jesus OR you are not aware if they know Jesus or not.

And just so we're clear and for definition purposes, a neighbor is ANYONE you cross paths with! If its someone that lives next door, great! Put their name down. Again, if it's a co-worker or classmate, put their name down.

For this practice to work, it's critical that you write their name down because the action step this week is to start praying for those people that you write down by name every single day.

Now, some of you don't know your neighbors, and this practice is going to be GREAT because your assignment is to get to know them. Some of you, don't know lost people...ALL you know is Christians, and your assignment is to find some lost "neighbors"!

Again, a neighbor is anyone God puts in your path – and it's most helpful if they are in your path on a regular basis! And all I'm going to ask you to start doing is praying for them AND start praying for yourself because here is what I have found as I have prayed for people through the years to come to know Christ.

Typically, as I pray for people to come to know Jesus, Jesus will typically begin to burden my heart to share with the them.

See, we begin in prayer because our neighbors need it – prayer is what will open them up to the message of Christ. And we begin in prayer because we need it – prayer is what is going to eventually give us courage to share with that person.

Corrie ten Boom – "We never know how God will answer our prayers, but we can expect that He will get us involved in His plan for the answer."

And I believe this is true. We begin in prayer. This was the lifestyle of Jesus. You read the gospels and you will see that often, Jesus would break away and spend alone, uninterrupted time in prayer.

- Before he began his earthly ministry, he spend 40 days praying and fasting...
- Before he called the first disciples to follow him, he spent all night in prayer...
- Before he went to the cross, he went to the Garden to pray...

Jesus's life was characterized by a life of prayer. Now, as it relates to prayer, I'm going to ask you to pray for those names that you wrote down every single day and here is what I'm going to ask you to pray for...nine prayers total:

- three specific prayers for those names you have written down and...
- six specific prayers that I'll ask you to pray for yourself.

Prayer #1 – A Prayer for Reception – “God, help _____ to have a soft and receptive heart.”

Jesus in a parable in Matt. 13, talked about the heart being like fertile soil. And if the seed of the gospel is to ever take root and produce fruit...then the soil – people's hearts need to be pliable and moldable...they need to be soft toward the spirit of God!

Now, we'll talk about ways that we can help cultivate the hearts of people over the next two weeks that can help make the heart MORE soft and receptive to the gospel, but again, it starts with prayer!

Just think about the hurt and pain that exists in our world today. Many people have experienced brokenness in ways that we might never be able to wrap our mind around and they struggle with the idea that there is a God that loves them.

Many have been hurt by the church and any sign of Christian talk and they are out! Their heart is cold and hard toward the gospel...the only way it begins to be softened is through prayer!

Prayer #2 – A Prayer for Revelation - “God, open _____ eyes and enlighten their mind to understand spiritual truth.”

When someone is not a follower of Jesus, they can't see spiritually. They can't understand spiritual truth. In order for this to happen, they need a soft heart AND they need their eyes opened and mind enlightened...they need Revelation! They are spiritually blind!

1 Cor. 2:14 – “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

2 Cor. 4:4 – “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

To be able to see spiritually is a miracle, and for people’s eyes to be open and their mind to be able to understand spiritual truth is something only God can produce in them. How does this begin to happen though? Through prayer!

Prayer #3 – A Prayer for Salvation – “God, I pray that _____ will come to know Jesus in a personal way.”

Listen, it is God’s desire that the people you are praying for come to know him in a personal way.

2 Peter 3:9 – “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

God loves the people that you wrote down on your sheet of paper. Jesus came and gave his life as an expression of that love and by faith in him, he will save ANYONE that calls on his name. Pray by name for that person to call on THE name and be saved.

I’m asking you to pray these three specific prayers over the people you have written down every day.

Illus. Names on floor – and just as a practical exercise, NEXT week, the old carpet is coming up and before we put the new carpet in, we’re going to ask all of you – we’ll have markers available –after the service next week, we’re going to go out to the lobby of the worship center and we’re going to write the names of people we’re praying for on the lobby floor before we cover it with the new carpet. And we’re going to pray that God will use you and this church to help bring those people into a relationship with Christ.

So, we’ve covered what to pray for the names of the people we have written down. Now, I want you to write down what I want you to pray for yourself as you consider what it means to BLESS your neighbor. And I get all of these prayers out of the parable we read about the “Good Samaritan”.

Prayer #4 – A Prayer of Availability – “God, I’m willing to be used for your glory today.”

I love how Jesus started this story of the priest, Levite and Samaritan coming across this man that had been beaten and was left half-dead. Look at it in:

Luke 10:31a – “Now by chance a priest was going down that road...”

“By chance?” Come on...NOTHING the Lord does or orchestrates is by chance. Nothing takes place outside the sovereignty.

As his children, we need to make this a MAJOR prayer every single day. “God, guide my path...where I walk...and in this remind me there are no coincidences when I am following you. I am available to you. Use me today in any way you see fit.”

It’s been said that God does not ask about our ability or inability, but instead our availability.

- Are you available to God?
- Are you open to divine encounters?
- Are you willing to walk through doors God opens?
- Are you willing to get out of your comfort zone should you sense the nudge of the Holy Spirit?

This is what the prayer of availability is all about. “Lord, guide my path...I’m available for use, just give me an opportunity...and this leads to the next prayer:

Prayer #5 – A Prayer of Opportunity – “God, give me eyes to see others as you see them today.”

In this parable, only the Samaritan really saw this man. Oh, the priest and the Levite saw him, but they were blinded by other things, namely their own busyness. They had places to go and people to see and business to attend to. Only the Samaritan saw this man as God saw him and actually slowed down long enough to do something about it.

How would our days be different and how would we engage the people we have written down if we prayed every single day, “God, help me to see them as you see them today. Give me your eyes.”

Remember what Jesus prayed when he looked out over the crowd that day...his disciples just saw people running around, but Jesus saw them and said in:

Matt. 9:36 – “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Begin praying now, “God help me to see what you see.” This is a prayer of opportunity. Open doors, God. I’m available to you, open doors of opportunity. I bet if we saw people as Jesus saw them, love would grow in our hearts for people!

This leads to the next prayer, I’m asking you to pray based off this parable.

Prayer #6 – A Prayer of Empathy – “God, help me to feel for others how you feel for them today.”

Did you notice that only the Samaritan (v.33b) “had compassion”. The two others saw the same man, they were just blinded by busyness. The Samaritan though – he felt something! Compassion.

The word “compassion” here in the scripture carries with it this idea to be “from the gut”. **Ray Pritchard** calls compassion or empathy - “**your hurt in my heart.**”

This Samaritan put himself in the sandals of this man beaten and left for dead and thought:

- What if that was me?
- What if that was my dad?
- What if that was my brother?
- What if that was me?

Let’s begin to pray every day, God help me to feel what you feel...not to see need and just turn the other way, but to feel what you feel and I bet if we do, this will lead to action. And this is the next prayer!

Prayer #7 – A Prayer of Mercy – “God, lead me to action on behalf of others today.”

This Samaritan jumped into action. He saw him. He felt for him. And the bible says in (v. 34a) “He went to him.”

He didn’t wait for someone else to come along. He didn’t throw this off as someone else’s responsibility or make excuses, he jumped into action!

What would our workplaces, schools and neighborhoods look like if they were full of Christians praying, “God help me to be a person of action today – my hands and feet are yours, Lord.”

When I see a need, I am going to meet that need. I am going to show mercy to those who need it the most...and in so doing I am showing them you!

Listen, the Christian life is a life of action...it’s a life of showing mercy...a life of service...and this leads to the next prayer:

Prayer #8 – A Prayer of Ministry – “God, use me to serve others today.”

The word “ministry” means “to serve”. We are never more like Jesus than when we are serving others (Mark 10:34, John 13, Phil. 2)! We are going to talk all about serving in week three! It’s the second the last “S” in BLESS.

We are all servants...and our job is to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. This is what that Samaritan did. With his hands he touched the unclean and ministered to him...he bandaged him...poured wine on his wounds to help bring healing. He served this man.

Begin praying it, “God, help me to serve others today.” And don’t specify who the others are! Like in this parable they may not look like you, share your politics or religion, they may not even like you! NONE of that matters!

If they are your neighbor, you are called to love and serve them!

Prayer #9 – A Prayer of Generosity – “God, use the wealth and resources you’ve given me to bless others today.”

In this parable, we are told this man took him to an inn took out two denarii (v. 35) – that’s two days’ worth of wages, and then he told the innkeeper, “Take care of him, and whatever you spend, I will repay when I come back.”

THAT is generosity! It’s saying God, I understand that what I have has been given to me from you and I am asking you to help me use today to do what we talked about last week – lay up treasure in eternity. “Use the wealth and resources you’ve given me, Lord to bless others today.”

Illus. Prof “servant evangelism” budget

I promise you if we see what God sees...feel what God feels...jump into action...serve...we’ll have no problem taking the logical next step and using the resources God has given us to bless others.

As we saw last week, this is why God gives us wealth in the first place! It’s not to store up and own more...possess more. But instead it’s to release more...give more...so that we can bless others more!

Can you imagine if we prayed these nine prayers every day? Can you imagine how many gospel conversations would take place if we prayed this to start our day and in and throughout the day? How many new “neighbors” we would see and eventually serve in Christ name?!

I’m asking you to take the B.L.E.S.S. challenge and ask God to grow in you the heart of a neighbor. It begins with prayer. I can’t wait to see what God does over the course of this next year as we decide to BLESS others in his name.

Let’s pray together.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.