

## The Blessed Ones

It is not uncommon to hear believers in the United States praising God for how He has blessed our nation and the church here. But why do they say that? What are the indicators they use to measure God's blessing on us? Most often these words of praise are followed by comments about the abundance of material goods, the beautiful buildings and the ability to provide money and people (missionaries) to the less fortunate peoples of the world. But, are these things truly signs of God's blessings on the church in the United states?

I have often asked my students to define what we, as the church in the United States, need from the global church. The typical response is that we are not in need, "and besides, even if we were in need, what could they provide?"

If you have read my earlier articles, you expect me to speak to the issue of international partnerships, and this issue of defining who is blessed is very relevant to that topic. Both James and John address the issue of the relationship between brothers within the family of God. In James two, James admonishes his readers about the sin of being a 'respector of persons.' He comments on the 'poor' in verse 5 in a way that should help us better understand what real needs are and how they can be met through the formation of biblical partnerships. James speaks of God choosing the materially 'poor' of this world, and He immediately says these same believers, the 'poor' in this world's goods, are 'rich' in faith and heirs of the kingdom He has promised to those who love Him. While God did not bless these particular believers with material wealth, He did give them something of greater value. He gave them the opportunity and responsibility of sharing from their 'riches in faith' with those of the family in spiritual need. The 'rich in faith' had an obligation of demonstrating their understanding that even though they were not materially wealthy, they were rich in those things significant to God. Furthermore, they were obligated to participate or share those blessings with the rest of the family of God.

Paul also speaks to this issue in Second Corinthians 8:1-10 where he challenges the Corinthian believers with the example of giving as practiced by the Macedonian

churches. Paul writes of the much ‘testing of trouble’ and ‘a depth of poverty’ experienced by the Macedonians. He also commends them that even in their material poverty, they were ‘willing to give according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave willingly.’ This commitment by the Macedonians to ‘the fellowship [partnership] of the ministry to the saints’ was a demonstration that they were rich in faith towards God. While the actual size of the gift may not have been great, Paul used the example of their sacrifice and love to challenge the believers in Corinth to ‘abound in this grace also,’ and to ‘test the trueness of their love through the eagerness of others.’

Paul also contrasts material and spiritual riches in I Timothy 6:17-19. In this passage, he calls on Timothy to admonish believers not to trust in their material riches but to ‘be rich in good works, ready to share, to be generous, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.’ A common testimony from believers today who have had the opportunity to visit the suffering church is their commitment to share with others from the little they possess, to give a meal to their guests while they go hungry, to provide the best they can while often sacrificing not only their own comfort, but of their very necessities. Maybe through these experiences God is giving us a modern day version of Luke 21:4 where we have been content to give offerings to God from our abundance, while out of their poverty, they have given all the living they had.

In II Corinthians 11:28, Paul says it is a difficult task to carry the spiritual burden of the care of the churches. However, it is the responsibility of the family members, who have learned through poverty, trials and suffering to be rich in faith, to help those brothers not similarly blessed by God to understand His perspective of true riches. All believers need to understand and embrace the reality that it is possible to experience the trial of our faith (being much more precious than that of gold that perishes, but being proven through fire) in order that we may give praise and honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, I Peter 1:7.

As international partnerships are developed, local churches and individual believers in the suffering church will have the responsibility and opportunity to help American churches

understand the sufficiency of the grace of God in times of trial. This will not be an easy task as the traditional role 'sending churches' have played will need to be reevaluated in light of the Word of God, and a new appreciation of the ministry potential of the suffering church. We can no longer view the world divided into the old model of 'sending' and 'receiving' churches. The time has come for local churches around the world to understand that each member of the body has a role to play in the health of the body.

A chapel speaker recently commented that 85% of Christian congregations in America are either plateaued in their membership or are actively declining amidst a growing national population. The church in America has great needs, and it is time we listen to the words of those who have had the opportunity to know God in a very intimate way, to know the sufficiency of His grace, and to comprehend what it means to be totally committed to God and His Church.

It is time for those parts of the body, traditionally viewed as "mission field" churches, in many instances lacking in material wealth, but rich in faith, to assume their God-given role to assist other family members as they experience the trial of their faith and grow their-in.. The International Partnership of Fundamental Baptist Ministries (IPFBM) exists to facilitate a global biblical fellowship between those 'rich in faith' and those 'rich in materials goods.' As each member of the body does its role the body will be edified and experience the true blessing of God.