

Blessing as “Security” and “Antidote” Against Curse in Luke 6:28a

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Introduction

Blessing and cursing are objects of belief in religion; it is generally believed that there are beings and forces responsible for positive things, like fame, health, life, and prosperity, and other forces that are sources of evil. These distinct forces are often invoked to transmit the required good or evil. Christianity identifies God as the source of blessing. The verb “to bless” denotes an appeal to God in his gracious power to bestow special favour upon the person or thing blessed. The bestowal of such favour is believed to empower the recipient and render him/her favoured and protected by God and capable of enhancing the blessing of others. What is blessed is considered consecrated, and therefore, impervious to that which is contrary to blessing. “To curse” on the other hand, denotes an invitation of disfavour on someone or something. To bar or exclude one from benefits and protection from God through various means supernatural or natural. What is cursed is execrated and vulnerable and is dreaded as the possible source of bad fortune for those s/he comes in contact with.

One recurrent phrase in the Christian Media in Nigeria and at pastoral counselling with Christians in the parish office is “inherited curses and effects”. The phrase “inherited curses and effects” or “intergenerational curse” is used in this work to refer to the belief that curses inflicted on parents run through the family and have effects on generations after them. This is a common African religious belief; found also in other world religions. Its presence in Judaism is evident in the Old Testament. While some texts like Exod 34:6-7; Deut 5:8-10; Lev 26:39; Exod 20:5 and Num 14:18 profess belief in the intergenerational migration of sins, others like Deut 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; Ezek 18:20 and Jer 31:30 oppose it. The two positions, however, substantiate the existence of such belief among the Jews of the time. The grip of this traditional belief on the OT people is carried over to the NT. The disciples question Jesus about the man born blind in John 9:1-3. It implies that among the people there was

a belief that when parents sinned, the effects of their sins were passed on to their children, and when there was a curse it migrated to the next generation. The question now is; can a Christian be subject to intergenerational curses?

This work attempts to provide an answer to this question by studying the phrase in Luke 6:28a. It undertakes a conceptual clarification of the terms blessing and curse in the Old and New Testaments and identifies that the two terms are opposed to each other; what is blessed is impervious to a curse and remains a channel of further blessings. While acknowledging that the invitation to bless those who curse in Luke 6:28a does not directly address the question above, an analysis of the text, however, reveals that the invitation by the Lucan Jesus to bless those who curse is founded on the presupposition that as Jesus' followers the disciples are already blessed and, therefore, belong to the new family of those blessed and favoured by God. Having been blessed, disciples are not vulnerable to curses, they are instead channels of blessing. As they bless (even in response to being cursed) in the exercise of their duties as those called to bless, their blessing emasculates the curses invoked on them. Consequently, Christians today are by their baptism disciples of Jesus and a blessed people. They are, therefore, not subject to intergenerational curses.

Conceptual Clarifications: Blessing and Curse

The terms used in the OT for the verb to curse include the piel perfect *killel* and the qal perfect *arar*. *Killel* denotes a wide range of injurious activity from verbal abuse to physical harm. Its primary meaning is “to treat lightly”; this implies “to treat with contempt”, to despise, to abuse. And where the divine is the object, it denotes disrespect for the “ethical standards ordered by God”.¹ The term *arar* on the other hand denotes curse from an operational perspective. It implies effecting a ban with a view to excluding; to anathematize, to bind or bar from certain kind of benefits; some form of a spell.² The LXX often translates these two

¹ F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, “*kalal*” in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 886.

² F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, “*arar*” in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 76.

Hebrew words with *kataaraomai* (see Gen 12:3). *Kataaraomai*, therefore, means “to curse” or “to execrate” someone or something.³ Curses are utterances designed to cause harm by supernatural operations. They are a declaration of evil, which brings about harm to someone, the harm itself, or the invocation of the harm. They demand belief for their fulfilment, and once uttered, act independently of those who utter them. The person cursed is thus believed to be exposed to the influence of destructive power that works effectively and irrevocably against the person execrated until the power that dwells in the curse is spent. William J. Urbrock, however, acknowledges the fact that measures have been used in the bible to counter uttered curses and are, therefore, not inexorable (Judg 17:1-3; 2 Sam 14:24-30, 36-45). Using Gen 12:3, Urbrock notes that steps are taken in advance to insure blessing and avert curses. He concludes that blessings and curses are not automatic and irrevocable. Their effectiveness depends on the authority of the person who pronounces them, the appropriateness of the time and place, and the rightness of the expected rituals and gestures, and God willing they can be revoked.⁴ Mundle is of the opinion that “cursing”, in the context of Mark 11:21, is a divine judgement that is exclusive of humans. Therefore, humans must not take active part in divine judgement and Christians are forbidden to curse. They should love their enemies and bless those who curse them.⁵

The words frequently used in the OT for the verb “to bless” and the noun “blessing” are *barak* and *berakah*, respectively. *Berakah* equally denotes “being blessed”, “being filled with blessing”, and the specific benefits of blessing (benefaction or enablement) like good fortune and power. The two Hebrew words are commonly translated as *eulogeō* and *eulogia* in the LXX and New Testament. The state of happiness arising from being favoured is expressed with the Greek *makarios* (see Matthew 5 and Luke

³ Walter Bauer, et. al., “*kataaraomai*”, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 525.

⁴ William J. Urbrock, “Blessing and Curses”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, David Noel Freedman (ed.), (New York, N.Y: Doubleday, 1992), 755-761 (755).

⁵ Wilhelm Mundle, “Curse, Insult, Fool; *kataaraomai*”, in, *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, Colin Brown (ed.), (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 416-417 (417); For other details on curses see Anne Marie Kitz, “Curses and Cursing in the Ancient Near East”, *Religion Compass* 1. 6 (2007), 615-627.

6). Being favoured however, implies receiving blessings from and being blessed by God. Thus, in Luke 1:42 and 45, the two roots are used interchangeably; here Elizabeth acclaims Mary as both *eulogēmenē* and *makaria*. Literally *eulegein* means “to speak well” both in terms of “speaking finely” or “speaking well of someone”.⁶ It implies “to say something commendatory of someone or something, to praise or extol” or to call for a bestowal of special favour, especially, God’s gracious power upon someone (Mark 10:16; Luke 6:28), or things, which are by implication consecrated (Mark 8:7; Luke 9:16).⁷ It also implies to provide with benefits.

The Source of Blessing

The Old Testament representation of blessing is understood as a passing on of life from God to the one blessed. This life implies such goods as vitality, health, long life, fertility, prosperity, power and numerous children as evident in Gen 12:3 and Psalm 127. All of these contents make up the Hebrew expression *Shalom*. Numerous progeny and fertility are dominant motifs in the consequences of blessings and invariably, their absence derives from a curse. God is the one who possesses and dispenses all blessings; this divine blessing is best summarised in the promise of Gen 26:3: “I will be with you” (see also Gen 17:7-8). The primary source of blessing is, therefore, God himself. He is the ultimate source of power that controls all good and evil (Isa 45:6). No blessing or curse can become operative without his assent. But humans, by virtue of their functions and authority, bless by praying Yahweh to bless and thus hook onto God’s continuous favourable working to bring about the good of the world of nature and of the individuals.⁸ Humans and objects too are blessed and turned into sources and models of blessing; thus God blessed the seventh day by making it a source of blessing in Gen 2:3 and blesses Abraham by making him and his generation a formula or medium

⁶ Hermann W. Beyer, “*eulogeō, eulogia*”, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, Gerhard Kittel (ed.), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1964), 754-765 (754, 755).

⁷ Walter Bauer, et. al., “*eulogeō*”, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 408.

⁸ Matt Champlin, “A Biblical Theology of Blessing in Genesis”, *Themelios* 42.1 (2017), 63-73 (69).

and model of blessing for the nations (Gen 12:3).⁹ The one who blesses is in some form a representative of God and acts on God's behalf in the exercise of the responsibility entrusted to him by God (Gen 9:26-27). In blessing, one entrusts the person or thing blessed into God's protection. Blessing is transmitted as an inheritance in the context of a family (Gen 49:26). It is often communicated through words, gestures and the imposition of hands. Through the hand contacts the blessing is considered to flow from the one who blesses to the one blessed. The same applies to a curse.

Kent Harold Richards identifies "the statement of relationship between parties" as primary factor in blessing.¹⁰ Blessing takes place in the context of a relationship between parties, it brings to light the favourable state of the relationship between the parties (Gen 21:1-3; Deut 7:14-16). Through the blessing received, the recipients and others are made conscious of the value attached to the relationship and consequently its desirability (Job 42:13). This applies to both divine-human relationships and human-human relationships. "Human blessings portray the goodwill between parties and find their basis in the human-divine relationship. Just as with God's blessing, they may either convey benediction (Num 6:24-26) or benefaction (Gen 33:11)".¹¹ Blessing is also used to entail "thanks", "praise", or even "worship"; each of these is predicated on a good deed done or expected. It may also be an act of greeting or prayer that invokes good for someone or seeks to avert or neutralize evil.

Peculiarity of Blessing

One peculiarity of solemn blessings is their independence from the one who utters them. They are "entities endowed with a vital reality"; once the blessing is spoken, it is irrevocable, irresistible and cannot be annulled.¹² The utterances act independently of the subject that utters them. Thus, Isaac could not take back Esau's blessing mistakenly placed

⁹ M. Daniel Carroll R., "Blessing the Nations: Toward a Biblical Theology of Mission from Genesis", *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 10.1 (2000), 17-34 (23).

¹⁰ Kent Harold Richards, "Bless/Blessing", in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1, 753-755 (754)

¹¹ Richards, "Bless/Blessing", 754.

¹² John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), 98.

on Jacob: “and now blessed he will remain” (Gen 27:33). Once blessed, one cannot be stripped of the blessing and not even a curse can counter the blessing; the blessing, especially from Yahweh, repels the curse and renders a curse impenetrable and ineffective. The one or thing blessed is endowed with the communicated power and set apart and becomes a “blessing” and a source of blessings affecting everything it comes in contact with; it becomes impenetrable to a curse.¹³ Thus, hired to curse Israel, Balaam could not but bless Israel against his primary assignment of cursing her, it was impossible for a curse to penetrate that which Yahweh had blessed (Num 23:8, 20).

The New Testament and Blessing

This OT notion of blessing is brought forward into the NT with Jesus blessing food (Mark 6:41; 8:7; Matt 14:19; Luke 9:16), blessing and instituting the Eucharist (Mark 14:22; Matt 26:26), blessing the supper at Emmaus (Luke 24:30) and the apostles at the ascension (Luke 24:50). Luke is particularly attentive to blessing and blessedness; these for him are founded on the choice made of humans by God for designated responsibilities. Thus Mary, having been chosen as the mother of God, is considered blessed by God among women (Luke 1:28, 42), and to be recognized by all as blessed, and source of blessing (Luke 1:48). She is blessed because by the divine choice she has found favour with God through the Son of God she carries (Luke 1:28, 30).¹⁴ She enjoys God’s protection and care, and consequently, must not be afraid. She is to be blessed for believing and trusting God (Luke 1:45). This implies that, like Mary, all who are chosen by God and believe in God, are favoured and blessed by God. By this blessing, they enjoy the protection and care of God.

It is in Luke too that the hymn of blessing/thanksgiving to God “the Benedictus” is proclaimed (Luke 1:67-79). Of interest in this hymn is the reference to the promised blessing and mercy to Abraham in Gen 18:18;

¹³ Jeff S. Anderson, *The Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 27. See also Beyer, “*eulogeō, eulogia*”, 755.

¹⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 360, 367.

22:17 (Luke 1:72-73). This was first captured in the “Magnificat” of Mary in Luke 1:54-55. This concentration of blessings, founded on God’s promise to Abraham, is depicted by Luke as being fulfilled in the event of the birth of Jesus. Luke thus establishes Jesus as the one through whom the blessing promised to Abraham is fulfilled and reaches out to all nations. This relationship between Jesus Christ and the divine promise and blessing pronounced over Abraham is a firmly held interpretation of Christian traditions (Gal 3:14), “the blessing pronounced over Abraham and all that he has is the promise of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Between Abraham and Christ, it rests on the people of Israel”.¹⁵ The divine promise to Abraham, which derives especially from Gen 12:1-3, on “blessing those who bless him and cursing those who curse him”, is about God’s promised reward and protection for Abraham as he undertakes the mission entrusted to him by God. This blessing is often interpreted in the NT to mean the salvation that comes from Christ, and NT writers have identified, in Christ, the fulfilment of Abraham’s role as the model and source of God’s blessing on the nations. Thus, all who belong to Jesus are brought into the fold of the Abrahamic blessing. They are absorbed or grafted into Christ and have been admitted into the covenant people of God and are consequently shown the mercy of God’s blessing promised to Abraham and his descendants. They have been brought into the kingdom of blessing, which flows from Christ, and, like Simeon, can praise God (Luke 2:28).¹⁶ They are the blessed of the Father of Matt 25:34, who await the reward of life and the kingdom of God, in contrast to the cursed in Matt 25:41, who are destined for eternal death. Like Abraham, followers of Christ are not just blessed; they have become a blessing, and thus partake of the security guaranteed by the divine blessing.

Brought into the sphere of blessing and enjoying the favour of God as a blessed people, followers of Christ are invited by Luke in the evangelical counsel to be dispensers of blessing by returning blessing even for a curse in Luke 6:28a (see 1 Cor 4:12). This invitation is expanded in Rom 12:14 to include blessing those who persecute them. Christians are called

¹⁵ Beyer, “*eulogeō, eulogia*”, 757.

¹⁶ Beyer, “*eulogeō, eulogia*”, 762.

to bless (1 Pet 3:9) because participation in Christ implies an invitation to go on a mission with the attendant risks.

A Study of Luke 6:28a: *eulogeite tous katarōmenous hymas*

Luke 6:28a forms part of the larger pericopé of Jesus' sermon on the plain in Luke 6:17-46. The sermon takes place after the choice of his twelve apostles in Luke 6:12-16. In all of these sections, Luke makes a distinction between the apostles (the Twelve) and the disciples (v. 13), and the multitude of people (v. 17). In verse 20, Jesus is said to address the sermon to his disciples; however, the phrase "But I say to you that hear" in verse 27a refers to all the disciples, including the apostles and all the multitude of people in verse 17 who listen to Jesus. This implies that the imperative, *eulogeite*, is directed to all the followers of Jesus who were listening to him, and primarily, to his disciples. The instruction (bless those who curse you) is one of the Lucan threefold elaboration on the principle of love for one's enemies stated in verse 27b. The other two are "do good to those who hate you", and "pray for those who mistreat you". In other words; "love your enemies" implies "do good to those who hate you", "bless those who curse you", and "pray for those who mistreat you". The disciples of Jesus are invited to bless those who curse them as an expression of love for their enemies. They are to bless because by their choice they have been abundantly blessed by God. This sense is equally contained in Stephen's plea for forgiveness for his murderers in Acts 7:60.

***Tous katarōmenous* "those who curse"**

The participle *katarōmenous* from the verb *katakaomai* is translated with the article *tous* as "those who curse". It is likely to refer to the Jewish curse context of pronouncing excommunication.¹⁷ It may, in the context of the Christian tradition reflected in Rom 12:14, include those who persecute. Romans 12:14, however, should be seen to embrace the entire Lucan elaboration of the love commandments contained in Luke 6:27-30. It implies, especially, love of enemies, those who abuse or insult, and those who strike (Luke 6:27-29). Luke, on the other hand, is particular

¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 1978), 259.

and does not just group them all under one heading but specifies each set of persecutors and the disciples’ corresponding response to each of them. Among such persecutors are “those” who curse the disciples. The verbal noun *katarōmenous* is used here in this context to imply those who pronounce excommunication with a view to barring the disciples from certain benefits and good fortunes, those who cast a spell on them and make utterances designed to cause harm by supernatural operations and those who execrate them and treat them with contempt and lightly and consider them not belonging anymore to the group of the favoured.

eulogeite

The verb *eulogeō* is used here to mean asking for the bestowal of special favour upon someone, calling down God’s gracious power.¹⁸ It is used in the imperative and paired with the second person pronoun *hymas* to imply that Jesus is urging his followers to ask for the bestowal of special favour from God upon those persecutors who wish them the opposite and make pronouncements that are designed to cause them harm. They are invited to bless by confidently handing over those who curse them to God’s protection because they are a people who already enjoy God’s protective blessing. They are a blessed people by virtue of their discipleship, whose mandate consists in bringing that blessing to others. As missionaries of blessing, their responses to mistreatment must not be determined by selfishness or ill will, but by their desire to populate the world with God’s favourable activity to bring about good in the life of every individual and family. “Any limitation on the standard must come from the best interest of the wrongdoer”.¹⁹

Blessing as Security

As followers of Christ, the disciples belong already to the family of the blessed, and the blessing received from God protects and secures them from any form of wishful disfavour and spell. This context of discipleship and blessing is played out in Luke 24:50-51. At his departure, the ascending Jesus, in a priestly imposition of hands (as in

¹⁸ Bauer, et. al., “*eulogeō*”, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 408.

¹⁹ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IX, Leander E. Keck (ed.), (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 3-490 (148).

Lev 9:22; Sir 50:20-21), blessed *eulogēsen* the eleven by calling down God's favour upon them. He shared his power of blessing with them, and through the blessing remains firmly bound to them. It implies the protective presence of the exalted Lord with his followers, and serves as the Lucan version of the Matthean "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt 28:20).²⁰ The one who calls, sends, and the one who sends, blesses to protect the sent. In other words, as a people already blessed by God through the ascended Lord, followers of Christ enjoy the overriding presence of the exalted Lord and are secured from all that is opposed to their blessings, namely, a "curse". Nothing shall hurt them (Luke 10:19).

The context of Luke 6:28a further defines this guarantee of protection. The invitation comes within the framework of the beatitudes (6:20-22), after the choice of the Twelve in 6:12-16. Having been chosen, the disciples (including the seventy-two) now belong to the family of the blessed ones (6:20-23; 10:23), whose names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). They are declared blessed because their share in heaven guarantees them an abundance of the favours that those who may curse them seek to bar them from.²¹ Even in the event of excommunication, disciples now belong to a new and inclusive community that guarantees the protective reign of God, abundance, gladness, and great rewards in heaven.

Blessing as Antidote

Antidote denotes something that counteracts, relieves, or prevents. As an antidote, blessing is understood as an event that undercuts or counteracts a curse. The invitation to bless in response to a curse is not to be understood as sheer passivity, rather it is a weapon meant to undermine or emasculate the curse. This alternative demand by Jesus is a "command, which completely overcomes cursing".²² It is the invitation to spread and wish even those who curse, the very best of fortunes as an

²⁰ Hans-Georg Link, "Blessing, Blessed, Happy, *eulogia*", in *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, Colin Brown (ed.), (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 206-215 (214).

²¹ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, 631.

²² Beyer, "*eulogēō, eulogia*", 763.

aggressive action to undermine hostility and violence. In the words of Alan Culpepper, it calls “for imaginative, aggressive, but non-violent responses to the problems that have borne such bitter fruit in our own time”.²³ “To bless” in response to a “curse”, therefore, acts, in this context, as an antidote to the curse already pronounced by the persecutors. Seeking to bring the persecutor to God’s protective favour is intended to overshadow the circumstance with blessing rather than allow the influence of the curse to dominate. In the context of the Hammurabi Law of retaliation, instead of populating the world with evil in response to evil, Christians are urged to counter evil with good so that the percentage of evil in the society may diminish and be matched by the percentage of good. Every blessing directed at the pronouncement of a curse reduces the dominance of the curse.

Theologically, the structure of blessings and curses which constitutes the organizing concept of the book of Genesis culminates in the blessing of Abraham as Yahweh’s victory over the curses, occasioned by the sins of humankind. In the same way every response to a curse with a blessing by each follower of Christ substitutes the evil occasioned by the curse with the good fortune, necessitated by the blessing. The invitation underscores the role of Christians as missionaries of blessings, who against every curse, make available to their society, the continuous auspicious activity of God to enhance the good of the universe.²⁴

Conclusion

By baptism, Christians are incorporated into Christ and become disciples of Christ; they are, therefore, beneficiaries of the blessings promised to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ Jesus. They are a blessed people and a blessing, with the ultimate mission to emit blessings from God. They are, by their status and function as a blessed people, secured against all that is contrary to their blessing. There is, therefore, no room even for an intergenerational migration of curses in the life of a Christian because membership in Christ breaks and impedes every curse. By exercising

²³ Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke”, 149.

²⁴ Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, Trans. K. Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 44-45.

their evangelical counsel to bless, they undercut the curses directed against them and populate the world with wishes of good fortunes.

Recommendations

- Christians should never curse because it goes against their mission as dispensers of blessings.
- Christians should never be afraid of being cursed or of being subject to inherited curses, because they are fortified against every curse.

The theological implication of Baptism as the sacrament of Christian initiation and rebirth should be emphasized because anything born is new and fresh and belongingness to Christ is freedom.