

Pentecost 16 / September 17, 2023

Psalm 103:2

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not His benefits.”

The Benefits of the Lord

What’s in it for me? Have you ever said or thought those words? When someone asks us to do something for them or with them, its only natural wonder, silently, “What’s in it for me?” What’s in it for us with God? God calls us into relationship with Himself through faith in Christ Jesus. The first benefit of the Lord is knowing the Lord. What’s in it for us in knowing the Lord? First and foremost is the forgiveness of sins. People might ask, “Why is forgiveness so important?” When we are hungry, is it forgiveness we need? When we are struggling to pay our bills, is it forgiveness we need? When we are ill, injured, grieving, languishing in depression, or facing death, is it forgiveness we need? Yes! It may seem counterintuitive and run counter to the thinking of the world, but the thing we need first and foremost in all things is forgiveness. When David counts the benefits of the Lord the thing, he counts first and foremost, is forgiveness.

What is it about forgiveness that is so important? Forgiveness is most important, because we need forgiveness to be in relationship with God. Forgiveness is most important to God, because He wants to be in relationship with us and for that to happen, we need forgiveness. No person or persons, conceived and born in sin can stand in the presence of God. Like paper coming into contact with fire, sin and sinners are consumed by God’s righteousness that burns hotter than all the suns in the universe. Despite our sin and sinfulness, God wants us to be in His presence. He wants us to be in His presence so much, that He made it possible by giving His eternally begotten Son to share in our humanity, suffer for our sins and sacrifice Himself on the cross for our forgiveness.

That’s how important human beings are to God. So important that He gave Jesus to die for our sins, so that we would receive His righteousness in forgiveness. That’s why forgiveness is so important to us. That’s why King David counts it as the first and greatest benefit of the Lord. It brings us into and establishes us in relationship with God. We all need forgiveness. In Christ, God made forgiveness for everyone. Through the gospel He offers it for all to receive. With David we sing, “Bless the Lord, O my soul and forget not His benefits,” first and foremost is the forgiveness of our sins.

When we think of the benefits of the Lord, we are perhaps likely to think first and foremost of physical blessings. Four men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus. For what? They brought him for physical healing, that’s what! Jesus healed the man physically after He first forgave His sin. He forgave His sin first, because the thing we need the most and the most important benefit of the Lord is the spiritual healing of forgiveness in Jesus’ name. Bless the Lord and forget not His benefits, who forgives your iniquity, heals your diseases and redeems your life from death and the grave.

Jesus called the disciples to follow Him heart and soul. He also told them to count the cost of following Him against the benefit of knowing Him as their God and Saviour. He wanted them to consider what was in it for them. What was in it for them was greater than any cost of suffering they would have to pay. What’s in it for us? The same as for them. Forgiveness, spiritual healing, the abiding presence of the Spirit of God and eternal life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. No matter what the cost of discipleship, there is nothing more important than knowing Jesus as Saviour. There is no greater benefit than receiving the forgiveness of His cross and standing in the presence of the Father through faith in Him in time and in His resurrection in eternity.

We place greater emphasis on physical benefits, because we are physical beings. We live in a physical world. Our bodies have physical needs. We need food, clothing, warmth and shelter. We need healing when we are ill and injured, we fear death. These are physical needs and disabilities, but they are first and foremost matters of the spirit. God did not create human beings to hunger, freeze in the cold, become ill, suffer injury and die. He provided them with the fruit of every tree in His garden to eat, save for one. He must have provided them with a tropical climate with little fluctuation in temperature, because they didn’t wear clothes, until they ate of the one tree forbidden to them. They didn’t get ill or suffer injury, until they ate of the forbidden tree. Death was unknown to them, until they disobeyed the word of the Lord and destroyed their perfect spiritual relationship with Him. The root of every physical problem is the problem of spiritual separation from the Spirit of the Lord through sin.

David celebrates the benefits of the Lord, beginning with the forgiveness of sin, because it is through forgiveness that He begins to heal all our diseases. It is through forgiveness that He redeems our lives from the pit, which is a word for the grave and an expression for death. Jesus healed people’s bodies as a sign that He is

the Christ the Son of God. Jesus healed people physically to show that He is the Saviour who takes away the sin of the world. This will ultimately result in the perfect healing of resurrection to a new and eternal life. The fulness of the benefits of the Lord.

When we are ill or injured, we pray the Lord for healing. But every illness should remind us of our mortality and that some day our bodies will succumb to injury or illness. God uses every injury and illness to strengthen our faith and prepare us for our last day, so that when the hour comes, we have faith to say with Jesus, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." The cold wind on our backs reminds us that we need to be clothed with Christ's righteousness to cover over our sin. The hunger we feel in our stomachs and the thirst in our mouths, reminds us we need to drink of His forgiveness in the water of baptism into His death and resurrection and be nourished with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. God uses our physical needs to remind us of our greater needs of the spirit and to draw us closer to Him through faith in Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins. In all things the Lord benefits those who love Him for the sake of Christ Jesus.

One of the benefits of God that is most celebrated in scripture is His mercy. In Psalm 103 David sings, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." What does mercy mean to you? For some people, mercy means to be given a second chance. Of course, a second chance comes with the provision that we don't mess up again. What happens when we mess up the second, third and thirty-third time? Mercy means God gives more than a second chance. The psalmist sang, He abounds in steadfast love and mercy. Every chance God gives is accompanied by mercy and motivated by His steadfast love in Christ Jesus. Mercy is God's kindness expressed in forgiveness for the sake of Jesus, time after time.

God deals with us in mercy for the sake of His steadfast love expressed fully in Christ Jesus, His life and the sacrifice of His cross. Looking forward to the coming of Jesus and the sacrifice of His cross, King David sang, "He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities...as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to His children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him. In Jesus, justice and mercy meet. Justice is when we get what our sins deserve, "The wages of sin is death." Mercy is to receive pardon for our sins. St. Paul cries, "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." In Jesus we receive the benefits of forgiveness, spiritual healing and the promise of resurrection to a new and eternal life.

Mercy is expressed fully in Jesus' cross, upon which He who had no sin, made Himself an offering for our sins. In Him we receive the mercy of forgiveness, not two times, three times or thirty-three times, but time after time and to eternity. God gives the benefits of mercy, forgiveness, spiritual healing and resurrection to a new and eternal life where hunger, injury and illness will be no more, to all who hold Jesus in their hearts as Saviour. In Jesus we receive the mercy of forgiveness in pardon and peace with our Father in heaven in time and for eternity. God bless you with the mercy of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. No matter what other blessings we receive in time that's the greatest benefit of the Lord in time and for eternity! In Jesus' Name. Amen