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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**August 30, 2020**

**"God Bless America"**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, I thank you for your grace, I thank you for your goodness, I thank you for all of the gifts that you've given to us, especially this body. Lord, I thank you for the folks that are here. I thank you for the Grace Fellowship Church. I continue to pray for the gift of your word that you give to us, Lord, without it we would be utterly lost, and so we are so grateful and thankful that we can rely on it, that we can again look at your word to find an understanding of who we are and who you are and how we relate to you. And this morning, Lord, I want to thank you for America as well. I just thank you for this country. And Lord again, we pray that as we look at just what it means to say "God bless America," that you would give us insight and grace and wisdom, and that it would be of permanent value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, you know the English language is a very strange thing. You can take a three-word sentence like "God bless America" and you know that it's become an incredibly popular statement, you know

that ever since 9/11 you see it virtual everywhere, you see it on signs, you see it on bumper stickers, you certainly hear it at the end of virtually every political speech ever given.

There's a funny thing about that sentence "God bless America," is you can say it in a host of different ways. You can emphasize the second word and suddenly it becomes a command, it's God, bless America! Put question marks in there and it changes the whole tone. It becomes a philosophical statement questioning whether or not God even exists and if he does exist, just what kind of God he is. See, you can put the question mark after God alone and then you're questioning God's existence. God? Bless America? Put the question mark after America alone it becomes a statement about God's rejection of America. God bless America? And we can alter this three-word sentence in so many ways simply by our tone, by our inflexion, by the look in our eyes as we speak it. And there's no doubt that there are many different ways that Americans speak that sentence. We can be demanding, we can be philosophical, or we can be kingdom-oriented all in the way we express those three little words "God bless America." And this morning we want to look at that sentence through three different sets of eyes. We want to look at it through demanding eyes, we want to look at it through philosophical eyes, and finally we want to look at it through kingdom eyes and ask the question which eyes are mine?

So first let's look at the phrase through demanding eyes. "God, bless America!" I mean that's his job, isn't it, to bless us? I mean there's more than a few people who think just like that. You see it's easy to lose sight of how demanding we are by nature. It was R.C. Sproul who first coined the phrase "Grace accepted yields grace expected." He observed that fallen human nature has a limited capacity for appreciation along with an unlimited capacity for expectation. The more grace we are given, the more grace we demand.

R.C. Sproul in *The Holiness of God* gave an outstanding illustration of just how that works. It's kind of a lengthy illustration. I remember reading it some twenty-five years ago, it stuck with me ever since then. So I'm going to read it given a little bit of its length. This is R.C. Sproul. He says this, he says:

"Our tendency to take grace for granted was powerfully demonstrated while I was teaching college students. I had the assignment of teaching a freshman Old Testament course to 250 students at a Christian college. On the first day of class I went over the course assignments carefully.

"My experience taught me that the assignment of term papers required a special degree of explanation. This course required

three short papers. I explained to the students that the first paper was due on my desk by noon the last day of September. No extensions were to be given except for students who were physically confined to the infirmary or who had deaths in the immediate family. If the paper was not turned in on time, the student would receive an F for the assignment.

"The students acknowledged that they understood the requirements. On the last day of September, 225 students dutifully handed in their term papers. Twenty-five students stood, quaking in terror, full of remorse. They cried out, 'Oh, Professor Sproul. We are so sorry. We didn't budget our time properly. We didn't make the proper adjustment from high school to college. Please don't give us an F. Please, oh please give us an extension.' I bowed to their pleas for mercy. 'All right,' I said. 'I'll give you a break this time. But, remember, the next assignment is due the last day of October.' The students were profuse in their gratitude and filled the air with their solemn promises of being on time for the next assignment.

"Then came the last day of October. Two hundred students came with their papers. Fifty students came empty-handed. They were nervous but not in panic. When I asked for their papers, again they were contrite. 'Oh, Professor. It was Homecoming Week. Besides it is

midterm, and all of our assignments were due in other classes. Please give us one more chance. We promise it will never happen again.' Once more I relented. I said, 'OK, but this is the last time. If you are late for the next paper, it will be an F. No excuses, no whining. F. Is that clear?' 'Oh, yes, Professor. You are terrific.' Spontaneously the class began to sing, 'We love you, Prof. Sproul. Oh, yes we do.' I was Mr. Popularity.

"Can you guess what happened on the last day of November? Right. One hundred and fifty students came with their term papers. The other hundred strolled into the lecture hall utterly unconcerned. 'Where are your term papers?' I asked. One student replied, 'Oh, don't worry, Prof, we're working on them. We'll have them for you in a couple of days, no sweat.' I picked up my lethal black grade book and began taking down names. 'Johnson! Do you have your paper?' 'No, sir' came the reply. 'F,' I said as I wrote the grade in the book. 'Muldaney! Do you have your paper?' Again, 'No, sir' was the reply. I marked another 'F' in the book.

"The students reacted with unmitigated fury. They howled in protest, screaming, 'That's not fair.' I looked at one of the howling students, 'Lavery! You think it's not fair?' 'Yes,' he growled in response. 'I see. It's justice you want? I seem to recall that you were late with your paper the last time. If you

insist on justice, you will certainly get it. I'll not only give you an F for this assignment, but I'll change your last grade to an F you so richly deserved.' The student was stunned. He had no more arguments to make. He apologized for being so hasty and was suddenly happy to settle for one F instead of two. The students had quickly taken my mercy for granted. They assumed it. When justice suddenly fell, they were unprepared for it. It came as a shock, and they were outraged. This, after only two doses of mercy in the space of two months."

See the more grace we are given, the more grace we demand. The more God blesses us, the more entitled to blessing we feel. There's a classic example from scripture and it's the reaction of the nation of Israel to God's provision for them after they were liberated from their slavery in Egypt. I mean if you remember they marched literally out into the desert and after a while because they are in a desert, they start is to starve, so they cry out to God for help. And the help that he sends them is literally miraculous, I mean, food rains down from the sky. This is *Numbers 11*, it says: *Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it and ground it in handmills or beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it. And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell upon the*

*camp in the night, the manna fell with it.*

I mean at first there was unbelievable joy, I mean every single day they would go out and find that God had provided for them. Then he even gave them a double portion before the Sabbath so they wouldn't have to work on the Sabbath collecting food. But sure enough, with the increase in provision came an increase in expectation. Grace accepted became grace expected and the expectation quickly turned ugly. *Numbers 11* says this: *Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leaks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."* This manna was originally seen as a life-saving miracle but even miracles can't satisfy a limitless expectation. We go forward to *Numbers 21*, it says: *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."*

Well if your reaction is anything like mine, you can't believe how ungrateful these people are. But then you have to ask yourself, do you think we would have done any better? I mean what about our blessings? What about what God has given to us? Do they increase

our appreciation or do they increase our expectation? I mean just think about this on a national scale. Just think about the physical protection we as a nation have enjoyed for centuries. I mean, have you ever wondered why things like famines, typhoons and earthquakes, they all seem to happen somewhere else but here.

Of the top ten earthquakes of the twentieth century, four of them occurred in China. The rest were in Italy, Japan, Peru, India, Armenia, and Iran. The worst one occurred in Tangshan, China. It happened on July 28, 1976 at 3:45 in the morning. It lasted all of sixteen seconds but after it was over 242,419 people were dead and 164,581 were severely injured. Thousands and thousands of households were just wiped out. We think that couldn't possibly happen in this country and you know why? Because it never has. And because it hasn't, it won't. It can't because we're America, and God blesses America. He always has and he always will. That's the essence of grace accepted becoming grace expected. We are so isolated and insulated from the horrors that the rest of the world lives with every day that it's natural for us to assume that our blessings are in fact an entitlement. And they are not. It's frighteningly easy to identify with the Jews in the desert. They were so used to being blessed that they too assumed it was an entitlement. I don't think it's too great a stretch to make the assumption that we too labor under that same sense of entitlement.



The scary thing with identifying with the Jews in the desert is that 99 percent of them, 99.99, had no relationship with the God that they dealt with every single day. I mean they bear a lot in common with today's evangelicals. They had a God-centered history, they had a God-centered culture, they even participated in God-centered rituals. They saw on a daily basis God's power, his provision and his protection, but they were as lost as any pagan nation could possibly be. They felt entitled to believe that God owed them a blessing because he always had. *Hebrews 3* warns us about the very same danger. It says: *As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief."* You got to understand, this is a nation numbering in the millions and out of that nation, two people, two people, Joshua and Caleb, were able to enter into God's rest. The rest all deluded themselves that they were okay and they all died in the desert. It's remarkably easy to find yourself numbered among people who are culturally there but not there in any other way, who see God's grace not as grace itself but as something that they're entitled to. I said the sinner's

prayer, I got baptized, I go to church, I even tithe. What more do you want, God?

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I spoke with a non-Christian friend a while back, and he was talking about three different evangelicals that he knew. He said, you know, they know far more Bible than I know but it seems to have no affect whatsoever on their lives. Then he said something that really struck me, he said, they act like Jesus is their own personal sin doctor, somebody that they take with them to clean up their messes. He said their lives are no different than mine except that they believe that Jesus makes everything okay for them. He said, you know, the world's got its spin doctors but you Christians, you got a sin doctor. Here's the hard part. The hard part is that Jesus is a sin doctor, in fact he is the great physician, and it's by his stripes that we are healed. If -- and it is an incredibly important "if" -- we do indeed belong to him. I mean, the Jews in the desert were convinced that they belonged to God, I mean, he was the cloud by day, he was the pillar of fire by night, he fed them personally every single day, protected them from their enemies. They just assumed therefore that they were part of the kingdom because grace accepted had become grace expected and they were tragically mistaken. Everything around them spoke of the kingdom and nothing inside them connected with it. You might say the very same thing about the evangelical church today and all the

external things that we have. We have our bibles, we have our doctrine, we have our worship and they all point to the kingdom but who knows what's going on inside? Who knows the internal things that they point to and those are the ones that matter. Jesus said, *"This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me."* And so we have to ask ourselves, where is my heart pointing? I mean what occupies my mind? Is it truly, is it the kingdom of God or is it the subtle demand of God that he bless me? And again we repeat the warning of *Romans 8*. It says this: *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.* That two-letter word, I-F, is so incredibly important in that passage. God says if the Spirit of God lives in you. He also says if that Spirit is not living in you, you are not a Christian. And I have to tell you, many of times I reflected on that verse. I thought about my own personal wickedness, my own pride, I thought about my indifference to the things of God, what I have and have not done

and I've asked myself if I'm not kidding myself that I'm part of his kingdom, that if I'm not just one of those demanding a blessing just like the Jews did in the desert. I mean I absolutely believe in eternal security. I believe that God never lets his children go, but I look at the Jews in the desert, and I see how easy it is to delude ourselves that we are his children when in fact we might not be. That's exactly what happened to the Jews in the desert. Paul even tells us we need to be asking ourselves again and again if indeed we are not deluded. Paul says: *Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you -- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!* God's trying to tell us here that if the Spirit of God dwells in us, there's certain characteristics, you don't think like the world, you don't talk like the world, you don't act like the world. If Jesus Christ is in you, your mind is set on what his spirit desires, not on what yours does. So if my mind is overwhelmingly set on what my flesh wants, then instead of appreciation for God's blessing, I've got expectation. I see those blessings as divine entitlements, and I'm bitter when they don't materialize. Just like the Jews in the desert, we too wind up telling God that this manna isn't meat and it's really detestable. And despite complete indifference or even hostility towards him we say "God, bless America," because he always has.

A second way to say "God bless America" is philosophically. Just put some question marks in the passage, and you have a brand new way to say it. God bless America? Again, you can question God's role in America by how you say it. I mean you can dismiss God completely from America's blessings and see it all as just the product of evolution and time and chance. You can take that course and many, many people do, but there's consequences to taking that course. You see, believe that and you can't say anything is good or evil about America, because without something transcendent, something bigger than us, something outside of us setting a standard of good and evil, then good and evil just do not exist. And what exists instead is just various opinions about what is good and what is evil and it really all depends on the culture that you're in. If you were in Germany in 1942, it was a good thing to kill Jews. In 2020 America it's considered by many to be a morally good thing to be able to kill children while they're still in the wombs of their mothers. Since human beings are all just accidents of time and chance and there's no transcendent morality to refer to, it's only what the culture says. It's all just evidence of an evolutionary struggle between highly evolved animals.

I mean we've almost completely forgotten about 9/11, but if you look at 9/11 from an evolutionary perspective, it really comes down to a problem. We had a subdominant group of Middle Eastern humans

who were struggling for dominance over American humans and they chose a very effective sneak attack to accomplish that. I mean if we're all highly evolved animals, who's to say that that was morally wrong? I mean in the end it just came down to our superior dominance enabling us to kill more of them than they were able to kill of us because it comes down to one basic tenet of evolutionary history and that is kill or be killed. We have no moral compunction when wolves kill deer or when lions kill gazelles, and if we're no different than them because we're just evolved from apes and we are just animals, well so what if Al Qaeda kills Americans? So what if it plans and executes a sneak attack against men, women and children? See, if atheistic evolution is true, then our only option is really to applaud their creativity and hope that we'll be able to kill more of them the next time. That's not a vision that I want to even entertain, but that's the consequences of an evolutionary viewpoint. God can't bless America because God doesn't exist.

Now believers would add another question mark to the philosophical approach to God's blessing. We'd say, "God? Bless America?" Because we don't understand why he would. It's a question that Christians ask more and more, probably more so than anybody today. We say how can God bless a country that systematically excludes him from its history, from its culture, from its education, a country

that now mocks God's idea of marriage, of gender, and of life itself, a country that protects the rights of a doctor to butcher a baby in the act of being born, killing over a million babies a year, a country that protects the rights of its citizens to produce virtual porn on the Internet while it forbids its citizens from placing nativity scenes in the public square because they're too offensive. I could go on and on. We've all heard it over and over again. "God? Bless America?" The undeniable fact is he does. We are the strongest, the wealthiest, the most influential country in the history of mankind. That's not a boast, it's a fact. And the question that we have to ask is not if God blesses America, it's why God blesses America. And the good news is the answer to that is clear, it's compelling, and it's stated over and over again in scripture. God never blesses without a reason and his reason is almost always the same: We are blessed in order to bless. And it was Jesus who said it's more blessed to give than to receive. God blesses us so that we might bless others again. It's stated as far back as Genesis 12 in God's call to Abram. It says this in *Genesis 12:1*: *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

So why did God bless Abraham? Well verse 3: *"I will bless you, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* Why does God bless America? So that America can bless all the families of the earth. And the scripture isn't shy about telling us how. We can go all the way forward from Genesis 12 to 1 Peter in the New Testament, and we see the very same principle applied to us as believers. Listen to what Peter says. He says: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* So why are we a chosen people blessed mightily by God? So that we can proclaim Christ's excellencies to those who are still in the darkness. We're blessed to be a blessing. And God even tells us how he wants his blessings given out. He says so in *Luke 6*, he says: *Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."*

God bless America? He absolutely has! Is it because we deserve it, is it because we're entitled to it? Absolutely not. *It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.* Is it because he loves us more than any other country? Again, absolutely not. God is no respecter of persons. Being an American is absolutely meaningless to the Lord



of the universe. So again, why does God bless America? He blesses us so that we might bless the world, and we do bless the world. We bless the world oftentimes with food and with clothing and with medicine but the most important thing that God has given to us to bless the world with is the gospel, and that's why God has blessed our country and that's why God blesses us personally. But that means that every single blessing that we receive should be filtered through a grid that says who or where or what am I to bless and how am I to do that? Again, we're the wealthiest country in the history of mankind. Do you really think that our personal wealth has been given to us by God for our personal comfort or to advance the kingdom of God? I mean you know there's a warning, there's a warning that God gives to all those who receive abundant blessings. This is what he says in *Luke 12*. This is Jesus' words. *Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.* We've sent our sister church in India less money than it costs to buy a new car but out of that funding, dozens and dozens of new works have sprung up. The gospel is going forward. We've been blessed to be a blessing. We've seen how that works.

I love how Randy Alcorn treats this subject in his book. His book is called "*The Treasure Principle*", wonderful little book. In that book Alcorn says we should be treating our income as if we are UPS

drivers or UPS drivers delivering blessings that God has intended for others that he's delivering through you. He says in the same way that it would be ludicrous and awful if a UPS driver began taking the packages intended for others and kept them for himself, so too should we treat the extra income that God gives us so that we can bless others with it. On a practical side as our income goes up, do we give away increasing amounts of it? It's so easy to think it's all about us, or is it really all about the kingdom? And the same is true of all of our resources. And how we look at them is really how we look at God blessing America because we are the America that God blesses. Again, he's blessing us for a reason. And we can see those blessings through demanding eyes and it will never be enough, because grace accepted will always yield grace expected. We can see them through philosophical eyes of an atheist who denies completely the very existence of God, or we can see through eyes that wonder how it could possibly be that God would still be willing to bless a country that has completely turned its back on him. Realize that God's blessings are all out of proportion to our wickedness and that we have been blessed to be a blessing and that can give us the right way to say "God bless America" that is the kingdom way. Just look at *John 3:16: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* That's the greatest blessing there is, that God loved us enough to

become one of us, to live out his life perfectly, then offer that perfect life as a substitute for our lives of sin so that we could stand before God now completely fitted for heaven, because if we've now been clothed in Jesus' righteousness, not our own. God so loved the world that he poured out his love and it cost him his life. But now he pours out his love through us. God is the source but we are the delivery system. And the most precious thing we can deliver by far is the gospel.

You know there's been one blessing that's come out of 9/11, among others, but one blessing is it's created a crack in the fantasy that we are invulnerable. All you have to do is look around today and you can see that God's blessing is being removed, whether it's a pandemic, whether it's economic distress, whether it's rioting in the streets, it's safe to say that our status as untouchable when it comes to hard times has been shaken to its core. More people than ever are ready to hear the account of the hope that you have within you. God has poured out his greatest blessing on all of us in this room on the body of Christ. We know the king of the universe. We know why we're here. We know how it's all going to end. What we don't realize is that as servants of the King, blessing others really isn't even optional. It goes with the territory. Listen to how Jesus put this in *Luke 17*. He says: *"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say*

*to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"*

So the question is are we doing our duty? Are we willing to bless others with the blessing with which we have been blessed? Do we see the advancement of the kingdom and the presentation of the gospel as our duty? I mean ask yourself, do I share the gospel with my non-Christian friends? Do I have any non-Christian friends? If you don't, get some. I mean if this sounds to you like this is some kind of mission, understand this is a mission.

We've looked at God's blessing through demanding eyes, through philosophical eyes, and kingdom eyes and we're asking the question right now: Which eyes are mine? It's a question every one of us needs to answer. Folks, the stakes couldn't possibly be higher. Over three thousand people went to work that September 11th, nineteen years ago, never knowing that that very day they had an appointment with their maker. 242,419 citizens of Tangshan, China went to bed that July night not knowing that they had the same

appointment awaiting them. We're all still tempted to think it can't possibly happen here. God blesses America because he always has. Again that's grace accepted yielding grace expected. And understand that God owes us nothing. God does bless America, and we can see it either through demanding, philosophical, or kingdom eyes. And my prayer this morning is that we'll see the blessing the very same way that God does, that we'll see it as the psalmist did in *Psalm 67* when he said this: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among the nations.* God, may your kingdom come and may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God bless America through us. Let's pray.

*Father, I just think of the abundance of blessing that we have. We look around at the world and we just see there's so much poverty and disease, so much fear and so much destruction throughout the rest of the world and all of us live in such relative peace, security, wealth and abundance. Surely you have not given us all these things to keep for ourselves. Surely you have given us these blessings in order to bless others. And the most precious gift you've given us is the gospel. Lord, I pray that you would touch each and every one of us, that you would give us anew the idea that we do have a mission and it is to broadcast that gospel to each and every person before they have their appointment with you. And I*

*pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*