



Christmas 2-January 3, 2021  
Baltic and East Nidaros Parish  
Ephesians 1:3-14 and John 1:10-18

## Earthly and Spiritual Blessings

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from his Son, the Word made flesh who is your source of grace upon grace. Amen.*

*When Jesus came down from heaven and became flesh on Christmas, he was especially sent from his Father to bring spiritual blessings to you. During the Christmas season, it is not hard for many of us to count our many blessings. Once again, I received more Christmas gifts than I deserved or needed or asked for. Other than being inconvenienced with a 24-hour stomach bug this past week, I am thankful that I have been blessed with good health through this busy Christmas season. Not every pastor is as blessed as I am to enjoy their calling as I am in this parish. When I look back on the past year of all the things that didn't happen, it still isn't hard for me to name a long list of blessings that did happen. But all these blessings in this long list belong under a column with the heading "Earthly Blessings."*

*Make no mistake about it, our heavenly Father enjoys delivering earthly blessings to us. In fact, he commands us to pray for earthly blessings. Since we have so many blessings, we often fail to remember to give thanks for them or take them for granted. Yes, Jesus became flesh and lived among us to know our human needs. John reminds us today that Jesus not only came down from heaven to deliver every earthly blessing which we collectively call our daily bread (everything we need for each day), but Jesus tells us today that he also freely delivers to each of us grace upon grace.*

*The Apostle Paul describes this abundance of grace upon grace as spiritual blessings. Paul adds the adjective "spiritual" to blessings to remind and teach us that earthly blessings and spiritual blessings are not the same kind of blessings. Maybe it is good timing today as we are still within the 12 days of Christmas and while some of us are still finding places to put away our earthly Christmas gifts to hear the difference between these two types of blessings that we often are tempted to believe are the same.*

*I pulled out several phrases from these few verses from Ephesians that Paul describes as spiritual blessings. Maybe this image of phrases is what John was talking about when he called them grace upon grace. These blessings are nearly stacked one on top of another. Paul drives his point home to his congregation of these spiritual blessings by repeating some of these blessings with different phrases that mean the same thing. If you distilled this scattered list of blessings down, the list would actually be much shorter than a list we could make of our earthly blessings. However, the difference between earthly and spiritual blessings are as far as the east is from the west or as different as John says the law of Moses is from the gospel of Jesus Christ. The advantage of one blessing over another is not found by looking at the length of the list.*

*Paul does not command or even encourage us to pray for spiritual blessings. Spiritual blessings are not given to us because we ask for them in prayer. Spiritual blessings are not removed from us when we fail to give thanks for them. Spiritual blessings are given in God's word delivered to you from a preacher. We play no active role in acquiring or receiving spiritual blessings. Our Heavenly Father speaks through his son who is the word and the Holy Spirit at the right time allows us to hear these blessings. Listen again how Paul describes you receiving these spiritual blessings. He chose us. He has blessed us. He has destined us for adoption. He delivers his blessings according to his good pleasure and in his timing. In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance. We have been marked with a seal. Grace has been lavishly and freely bestowed on us our inheritance.*

*After hearing this beautiful list of spiritual blessings, we still try to apply the same rules we use with Christmas gifts or earthly blessings to these spiritual blessings. We want to be in control of deciding if we really want to receive the gift or not. We think we are able to reject the gift if we don't feel we deserve it. We might accept the blessing at first, but make sure that the blessing comes with a gift receipt, so we can return it if we decide it isn't for us or was given to us by mistake. However, as Paul makes clear, "In Christ" there are no trial periods or return policies that get attached to spiritual blessings. They are unconditionally given. Spiritual blessings are non- returnable, non-refundable, indestructible, and eternal.*

*Paul lays out this pouring out of grace upon grace and every spiritual blessing up through verse 12 in Ephesians, but Paul also realizes that you will apply the rules of earthly gifts to spiritual gifts and attempt to assert your control over them. Maybe you too are pleased with this list of blessings. You believe that "In Christ" all these spiritual blessings are possible for some people, but there is still something missing before you are convinced that you have been bestowed this heaping pile of grace upon grace.*

*I have a little better understanding of what could be still be missing and leaving you wondering after what Kim and I went through to upgrade our cell phones this past week. We both recently have been considering upgrading our phones. And low and behold, the timing seemed perfect as we received what appeared to be a deal that was heaven sent. It seemed too good to be true. We were told about this amazing upgrade offer from family members who had gone in and seamlessly went to the store and made the upgrade and came home boasting of their good experience in receiving this blessing. It seemed that Kim at least had also been chosen to receive this good deal since she had received a text describing the same great deal. I think I received the same text message but doubted if it was really for me. We went to town early one afternoon to receive our blessings. When the sales agent had finished pleasing other customers, we were asked how we could be helped, and we explained how we had been chosen or destined to receive this good deal and we had now arrived to receive our blessing. I assumed that this person who was available to help us would have shared in our joy and it would have been his good pleasure to bestow our new devices to us. But instead, he looked at us with disbelief and informed us that there were no such deals like we had described to him. I rebuked him and told him that my son had just got this deal the day before in this same store and we had been promised the same through a text message. Without any apology, he said, "That's just how these things go. These deals can expire at any time. But again, we rebuked him and said, the blessing was in place for at least another day." I insisted that they couldn't back out on the promise that was made to us and given to others. I knew my patience was getting short and it would be better to leave before we said or did something either of us would*

*regret. We went home wondering how this blessing had expired prematurely. To make matters worse, when we got home, we learned that my son-in-law was also chosen to receive this blessing too and it was freely given to him without any hassle at the same time as we were denied.*

*We were like the people in this scripture who had heard the good news that they had been destined to receive every spiritual blessing, but then the blessing seemed to have vanished. They believed the blessing was given to others, but there was uncertainty if it was for them.*

*We returned the next day to the same store but dealt with the manager of the store. This manager was a student we had known from Tri-Valley from several years ago and told us to make a phone call to the corporate store. After a brief wait for someone to answer the phone, this agent quickly acknowledged the deal we thought we were destined to have and gave the manager permission to bestow to us our blessing. The blessing only became real to us when we heard the words this deal is “for you”.*

*The words, “For you” confirm that these spiritual blessings are not just great for others to receive, but the blessings are for you. Paul preached these words to those who felt the deal was no longer for them or that they were too late. Paul proclaimed “In him, YOU ALSO, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. They had received their full inheritance that could never be taken away.*

*Earthly blessings are necessary, but none of them are eternal. Earthly blessings help us to exist and enjoy this world. Spiritual blessings are bestowed, and they are for you. You have been predestined and chosen in the waters of baptism to become an adopted child of God. In the Lord’s supper, Jesus declares his forgiveness is for you. You also now have heard the word of truth; the gospel of your salvation and this spiritual blessing is for you. Amen.*