



# THE BARNABAS LETTER

A Newsletter from The Barnabas Center; A Nonprofit Counseling, Training & Teaching Ministry

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# The Blessing

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*By Palmer Trice*

*Palmer is the founder and director of The Barnabas Center. He teaches the 'First Love' of God in a variety of settings. He is married to Lynne and has 3 children.*

# Jacob's Blessing

## searching for first love

**A** wild story is Genesis 27. It would be fun to set it in the present and film it.

The twin brothers are as different as they could be. One (Esau) is clearly loved more and chosen by his Dad (Isaac). Esau is a man's man who undoubtedly drove a pick-up truck with a gun rack. Esau was described as "a skillful hunter, a man of the open country". Jacob, on the other hand, was chosen and loved more by his Mom (Rebekah). He was "a quiet man, staying among the tents". It is quite a contrast – a man's man and a mama's boy. But the two had one big thing in common. Both desperately wanted Dad's "blessing". Both longed for something from their Dad that had real value to them.

All of us who grow up with siblings know at least a little bit what that is like. We want to be chosen by our parents, to be believed in, validated, and valued. We want to engender pride and deep affection in our parents. We want words from them that we hope will fill some void in our souls. We want to be blessed.

The story sets up like this: Isaac, a man's man, calls his eldest in for a little chat. "Go hunt some wild game for me. Bring it back and make me a special meal... and then I will bless you."

"Bless you". What does that mean now? What did that mean back then? We aren't exactly certain. Jacob had already acquired the *birthrite* from his brother, in return for a bowl of stew. The *birthrite* was the disproportionately large share of the inheritance given to the eldest son. So Esau had already traded that away for almost nothing. But now he is about to get something else from his Dad, something that had deeper meaning and value. Unlike the *birthrite*, the 'blessing' wasn't tangible. It wasn't financial. It was just verbal. Words – that was all it was – words. But he really wanted those words. And the struggle for this blessing would create quite a mess.

The concept of blessing in the Old Testament denotes favor. Most often, it is demonstrated by someone declaring a desire for the other to have material blessings or more children (a particularly meaningful blessing in that day). Sometimes God blesses man. Sometimes man blesses God. Sometimes man blesses man. The blessing involves some meaningful proclamation about someone else. It is not magical. It is not necessarily prophetic. But it is deeply meaningful and treasured. And it is just words. Fighting over financial blessings makes more sense; those are tangible. But fighting over words? Does that make sense?

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**"We want to be chosen by our parents, to be believed in, validated, and valued. We want words from them that we hope will fill some void in our souls. We want to be blessed."**

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In the story, Rebekah crafts a crazy plot. She dresses her “quiet son” up in animal garments, cooks up her version of a gamey meal, and sends her favorite son in to deceive her husband, his Dad. Jacob does his best to become his brother. He dresses like him, smells like him, tries to talk like him, and tries to deliver to his Dad what his brother would have delivered. He becomes someone else. That is sure one of the ways we go after blessing. We look around and see how others are getting blessed and try to become them. But does it work? Do we really get what we’re longing for?

Let’s go back to the story. Somehow, Jacob and Rebekah pull it off. After a dramatic scene in which Isaac skeptically questions Jacob who swears that he is, in fact, Esau, Isaac blesses Jacob (though he really thinks he is blessing Esau). Of course, right after the very moment of Isaac’s expressed blessing of Jacob, Esau enters his Father’s room. The cry from the depths of Esau’s soul when he hears that he has lost “the blessing” is almost palpable through the centuries. “Bless me – me too, my father!” His great hope to receive those words from the one he values most, disappears in the blink of an eye. His chance at blessing is gone.

### **The Hole in The Soul**

There is a hole in my soul for some kind of blessing and I don’t know what to do with it. Sometimes I try to pretend it isn’t there. Sometimes I try really hard to fill it with stuff. Sometimes I connive to get it filled. Sometimes I just try to be someone else, someone that I am not. But maybe if I am good enough, smart enough, work hard enough, look good enough, then I will get it – words from someone that might fill that hole.

The life of Jacob is the story of a man on a mission to fill that hole. He tries getting it from his mom and dad. He tries getting it with sex and in marriage and with children. He tries scheming and manipulating others for his own ends. He tries

and tries and tries, only to find that what he deeply longs for is somehow missing. Sex, marriage, kids, money... none of these will fill the hole. Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher and mathematician, said it this way: *“in each man there is a God-shaped hole that only God can fill.”* There is a hole. How do we fill it?

### **Two Ways to Fill the Hole**

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic contemplative, talked about the notion of two loves this way. *“All our struggles in relationships are connected with what I like to call the relationship between the ‘first love’ and the ‘second love’. The first love is from God, who loved us before we were born. The second love is from our parents, brothers, sisters, and friends, and it is only a reflection of that first love. Sometimes we expect from the second love what only the first love can give. Then we experience anguish. My personal struggle has always been that I expected a first love from someone who could only give a second love.”*

We have this hole that only the first love, the love of God, can fill. It isn’t that words from loved ones don’t matter. They do. All of us want to receive words of blessing from our parents. Those of us with children want to give them words that speak to our great belief in, affection and hope for, them. But our words cannot fill the God-shaped vacuum .

Jacob’s story is our story. We are men and women on a mission. We live with two holes in our souls – one that can only be filled by the first love and one that requires the second love. It is so very easy to get the two confused. And we get in trouble when we try to make the second love fill the vacuum/hole that requires the first love.

Do you know what words you long to hear? Do you know whose words would seem to fill that hole? Is it your mom or dad? Your boss or mentor? Your friends? The peo-

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**“Jacob’s story is our story. We are men and women on a mission. We live with two holes in our souls – one that can only be filled by the first love and one that requires the second love. It is so very easy to get the two confused.”**

**“God has blessed us with the words of ‘first love’. In an ultimate way, we have the promise that quiets our souls’ search for blessing.”**

*By Roger Edwards*

*a counselor and teacher at The Barnabas Center. He is married to Jean and they have seven children. And two granddaughters.*

*Roger's blog:*

*<http://actuallyalive.wordpress.com/>*

# Receiving is Complicated

## How to Gain The Blessing

**Y**ou'd think receiving a compliment would be a simple thing, natural even. But for me, receiving a compliment is complicated. In fact, receiving anything is complicated.

"You're a good man," my wife, Jean, says the other day. No warning, she just says it - offhand, like it just came to her, spontaneous and authentic.

Now if she'd tacked on a request, I could have handled it better. "You're a good man...so you wouldn't mind cleaning out the garage, would you?" Or if she'd been trying to make up for an offense, I could account for that.

Yes, I understand the typical buy/sell relational transactions. In those, you don't really 'receive' anything, you more or less trade favors. Those typical transactions irritate, but they don't conflict me so.

In this case, Jean's designs were diabolically benevolent. She wanted to bless me with something she believed. She just wanted to give to me. Now what do you do with that?

It's all very confusing. Why isn't receiving easy? Something good is offered to you; just be grateful - just take and enjoy. But it doesn't work this way in practice. I'm perfectly

comfortable trading pseudo-blessing, but completely thrown by the real thing - a gift-blessing. Receiving is complicated.

It gets worse. Since the meaningful things in life are all gifts, then my happiness depends on having the humility to receive. Did you hear that? Basic human happiness depends on receiving. If I can't receive, I'm relationally/spiritually lost.

A compliment is just one form of blessing. And all blessing is a gift. The common blessings are gifts; air, sun, rain, consciousness. Even more the deeper blessings; love, attention, loyalty...salvation. To know life, you must learn to receive.

So everything depends on receiving, yet I balk at a simple compliment. I experience this weird vertigo. I like the compliment, I want it, but somehow I just can't let it in. Gift-blessing tilts me off-balance and my attempt to regain control forfeits joy.

I get this intense urge to even things up a bit. I might try paying my wife back; "Well, you're a good woman, too." There, now we're even. Yes, I lose a little of the gift, and yes, I rob a little of my wife's pleasure... but I feel better, I don't feel so beholden.

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**"You'd think receiving a compliment would be a simple thing, natural even. But for me, receiving a compliment is complicated. In fact, receiving anything is complicated."**

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Another way I attempt equilibrium is to internally discount the compliment. I think, "If she only knew..." or, "she doesn't really mean it..." Minimizing blessing temporarily restores control too - "if its not that valuable to me, then I am not so... 'given-to'".

And that's the thing...I am very uncomfortable with that 'given-to' feeling. Yes, that's the problem. I want the gift, but not the sense that I need. I want to believe somehow that I can earn, buy or deserve gift-blessings. I've even tried to steal them (via guilt or coercion). Anything but be 'given-to'.

Yes, blessing conflicts me. I want the compliment, but I don't want to need it. I want people and God to give to me, but not because they want to. I want them to 'have to' - because I am nice, fun to be with or because of all that I do for them. I don't want to rely on their good will. I don't want to trust.

### **The Blessing-Nerve**

When Jean blessed me, she touched a nerve - call it the blessing-nerve. Bundled and woven into and through me are sensors for gift-love. So integrated, the blessing-nerve isn't part of who I am - it is who I am - an affirmation-hungry, affection-needing, blessing-dependent man.

Jean's words brushed against my need. Something awoke. Her words, both in content and tone, activated the core of me, that is, my capacity to receive grace. Think about it. This is what you are - a creature made specifically to receive (and emit) love. What was Adam, if not a living vessel into which God pours love?

And yet something has gone terribly wrong. It turns out that although I am defined by my need of grace, I am, at the same time, deeply ashamed of it. Wrapped around my blessing-nerve is something like a malignant vine. Call it autonomy, call it self-centeredness, call it the

flesh. But this vine wars with my central identity.

Autonomy versus dependence. The two are enmeshed such that day to day, they are almost indistinguishable. So when my core desire is aroused (say, by a compliment), simultaneously activated is my core shame. I want love desperately and yet it feels like death to need it. Blessing initiates this deep internal conflict. I am twisted in knots, so I often refuse the blessing to gain relief.

Though I'm made (literally) for blessing, I can't stand it. I'm the child who begs to be tickled and then can't handle it. I'm the musician who plays a strain so sweet that he must stop. I am the writer who seeks the transcendent and when it comes - flees for lack of heart.

'So thank you very much Jean for the compliment, but it's not like I need it. Your kindness is nice, but I can take it or leave it.'

'Of course, if you stop, I'll retaliate with distance or coldness...But I just can't let you see how hungry I am for love... no, that wouldn't do. I want you to stay close. Close enough that I can trade attention, coerce a little affection, earn a little kindness. But I also want you to stay far enough away that you won't notice how naked I am.'

And of course, I relate to God similarly. Close enough to recite the doctrine of grace, but distant enough to pretend that my niceness pays Him back. Close enough to sing of Divine kindness, but not so close as to lean into a Father's breathing embrace.

### **Need It**

Receiving is complicated. But I can summarize how to receive God's love: 'Need It'.

This means you must sever the vine of autonomy. Confession is the

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**"Yes, blessing conflicts me. I want people and God to give to me, but not because they want to. I want them to 'have to' - because I am nice or because of all that I do for them. I don't want to rely on their good will. I don't want to trust."**

**"I relate to God similarly. Close enough to sing of Divine kindness, but not so close as to lean into a Father's breathing embrace."**

*By Brian Whisler*

*The author is privileged to be husband to Margaret and father to Abby, Riley, Zachary, living in Virginia.*

# Blessed to Be a Blessing

Like most bumper sticker theology, I've never fully understood this one. It sounds like something I should aspire to, but I don't quite know how to get there. I do know that in the midst of our struggles with brokenness, we are blessed by the grace and mercy of God. And the enormity of this gift compels us to respond by being a blessing to others.

We are all like Jacob, in that everyone pursues blessing. But how can I move past this to the next question? That is, how do I bless in a way that demonstrates gratitude and impacts (with gospel integrity) another's pursuit of blessing? How I can bless others in a meaningful way?

Being a blessing certainly includes living generously, taking an interest in the welfare of others, and meeting the needs of those around us. Applying this is a great start because too often I'm neglectful or even apathetic about this baseline for blessing.

But it seems that the greatest need for blessing has less to do with the material and more to do with the spiritual. Being a "blessing" in a Biblical sense connotes something far more profound -- Heaven, Life,

Blessing, concepts that are often hard to grasp yet inextricably linked.

When I think about those who have blessed me in my journey of faith, the common gift they have offered me is affirmation. In its purest form, blessing allows me to stand secure in the knowledge that I am affirmed by friends and family who have made it clear they are for me -- based not on what I do, but who I am. My identity as a child of God is the same way -- rooted in relationship, established by amazing grace.

How then do I live in a way that blesses through that kind of affirmation? There is a direct correlation between my grasp of grace and my ability to bless. I'm liberated to bless horizontally when I understand the blessing I have received vertically. Most often, I give to others commensurate to what they give me, making me no more than a consumer of relationships and one who withholds real blessing. Gospel-rooted blessing, like the Kingdom, is upside down. When we bless people who don't deserve it, we model the grace that we've received as adopted sons and daughters. Indeed, we put feet to the Gospel and portray the face of God. This is extraordinary, abundant life,

full of meaning, purpose, integrity, and love. In theory, this notion of living should be transforming, propelling me to look for opportunities to offer blessing to others. But too often it doesn't. I stand silent in apathy or I bring a form of curse (whether silently or aloud).

I don't mean a curse of a four letter variety, but a curse that wounds identity or diminishes life. Similar to Adam's silence during the temptation of Eve, a failure to bless or to speak into a life, can create a curse. There is no neutral ground. If I fail to voice affirmation for those placed in my path -- by confirming their identity, by blessing them for who they are, not for what they do -- I can contribute in a subtle but profound way to effecting a form of curse on someone's life.

My failure to bless can leave a void that creates doubt, uncertainty, and pain, particularly in the lives of my wife and my children. Like Tevya in the Fiddler on the Roof, we all need to hear that we are blessed and loved. Voicing the blessing with words is just as critical as demonstrating with actions.

My father modeled this kind of blessing in my life. The affirmation I

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received from him has profoundly shaped my identity as a man, as a father, and as a husband. While he was not emotionally profuse, he did take care to affirm me for who I am – his son, his own beloved. While he was proud of my accomplishments, I always knew that his overriding blessing for was for me, his son – without concern for merit or performance. I knew that I was blessed by my father because he voiced it so clearly and so generously.

*(Continued from page 3)*

ple who listen to you speak or notice how you serve? Your children who finally appreciate what you did? Who is it and what do you want to hear?

Those words do matter. But the words from the second love cannot fill the hole of the first.

The good news of the gospel is that God has spoken those words

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axe. Confess the various ways you refuse grace; minimizing, self-righteousness and pretending you do not need.

But don't just confess your sin. Confess also your need. Embrace the way you are made. Shout out to Him that you are so shaped to be filled with His gift-blessing. Learn to enjoy the blessing-nerve that is you. Be astonished that you (your body, your mind, your heart) are designed and to actually sense grace. Your hunger for God's love is your greatest need, but also your greatest attribute.

You can start by accepting compliments; 'thank you', 'that means something to me'. You can start by expressing gratitude for the free

How much more, then, should the lavish love of my Heavenly Father compel me to affirm, to bless? My wife and children – as well as all those placed in my path – need to know that I am for them, that they matter because of their identity not their merit.

Life giving both to the giver and recipient - blessing is a call to declare, to pronounce, to bestow affirmation. The enormity of God's affirmation compels us to be a blessing to others.

through Jesus to you and to me: "I love you and want to spend forever with you. I believe in you and I want to use you for good." God has blessed us with the words of 'first love'. In an ultimate way, we have the promise that quiets our souls' search for blessing. It is the promise that can settle us in such a way that our lives can be marked more by giving than by searching.

blessings of the day; sunshine and smells, bread and buttercups, children and conversation.

You progress further by accepting God's compliment - The Blessing. He made you for Himself. He died to destroy your malignancy. He is calling you to believe that who you are - a blessing-dependent creature is answered fully in who He is - a blessing-rich Creator. You receive The Blessing by needing Him.

Embracing dependence feels frightening - even shameful. But it will not always be so. One day we will not shy away from the music so sweet, the inspiration sublime nor the breathing embrace. Someday we will drink great draughts of God's love. And laugh for joy.

**“Life giving to giver and recipient - blessing is a call to declare, to pronounce, to bestow affirmation. The enormity of God’s affirmation compels us to be a blessing to others”**

**“Receiving is complicated. But I can summarize how to receive God’s love: ‘Need It’.”**



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## • UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES:



Date(s)	Event	Facilitator(s)
4th Wednesday of Every Month at 1:30pm at The Barnabas Center	<b>Intentional Intercessors:</b> Come and pray with us for the ministry at Barnabas for one hour once a month.	<i>Barnabas Staff and Friends</i>
Now Enrolling Monthly	<b>Honor's Program for Men:</b> A 14 week small group where men who struggle with sexually addictive behavior come together to lay a solid foundation for relational recovery. Visit our new Honors Program webpage for details on groups and related services: www.thebarnabascenter.org/honors.	<i>John Pierce Kurt Zuiderveen</i>
Thursdays from 6:00-8:00pm Groups begin June 2	<b>Real Beauty:</b> A 10 week small group where you will join together with other women facing various body image struggles by exploring your life story and embracing your inner feminine beauty and God's perspective of your physical appearance in the safety of a small, guided group.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
Thursdays from 6:00-8:00pm Groups begin September 8	<b>Healing Hearts:</b> A 14 week group for women who have experienced childhood trauma. It provides a biblically based, confidential context where women can wrestle with difficult realities related to their harm.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
Groups begin when roster fills	<b>Journey of Men:</b> A 14 week small group for men that provides a safe context to interact with the personal and practical questions around what it means to love God and others more deeply in all the varied spheres of a man's life. Email kzuiderveen@thebarnabascenter.org to sign up for a group.	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Mondays from 6:30-8:30pm Groups begin September 14	<b>Barnabas Training Level Two:</b> a ten week training program in a small group setting that expands upon Level One material. Level Two focuses on the application of the model requiring a greater level of personal engagement. Prerequisite: Completion of Barnabas Training Level One.	<i>Pete Bondy Roger Edwards</i>
Mondays from 4:00-6:00pm Groups begin September 14	<b>Barnabas Training Level Four:</b> a six week session (every two weeks), thorough peer supervision experience in which participants will present real life care giving scenarios in group and individual settings. Prerequisite: Completion of Barnabas Training Level Two.	<i>Pete Bondy</i>
<b>Barnabas Center—Richmond, VA</b> Groups will begin in September	<b>Fall Groups at Barnabas Center-Richmond will include:</b> Barnabas Training Level One, Barnabas Training Level Two and Healing Hearts (descriptions for each above). All groups will begin September 2011. Email Lisa Ould (lould@thebarnabascenter.org) for more information.	<i>Lisa Ould</i>
Thursday, October 6 6:30-9:30pm Center Stage @ NoDa	<b>Barnabas Benefit:</b> Save the date for our first <i>Barnabas Benefit</i> fundraiser party (in lieu of annual golf tournament). The evening will consist of dinner, entertainment, silent auction and an opportunity to hear testimonies from clients who have been affected by The Barnabas Center's ministry. Invitation to follow.	