

# **Simple ways to BLESS**

## **1. Breathe and Pray**

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We do it without thinking about it. We even do it in our sleep. If we stop - we're dead. I'm talking about breathing. Whether you are exercising or relaxing, breathing really important. Breathing gets oxygen into your blood stream and removes waste from your system.

So, let's do some together now. Take a couple deep breaths... inhale ... then exhale. Now, play the old game of who can hold their breath longest! We'll make it a competition. Let's see if you can hold your breath longer than the pastor. We'll raise our hands and take a deep breathe in and hold it; then, lower your hand when you exhale. The urge to breathe is really strong, isn't it? That's because God designed your body to work that way!

You are designed to breathe spiritually, too. You are designed to take in and breathe out, to take in and breathe out God's blessings. **We are created to breathe God's blessings.** We are created to receive from God and to give away what God gives. That's the rhythm of spiritual health.

Thousands of years ago God taught a guy named Abram the principle of breathing blessings in and out. It is recorded in the Bible so that you and I can learn this principle, too. **Genesis 12:1-3** *The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup> "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

God told Abram he will bless him with a land, a place for him and his descendants. This is known today as the nation of Israel. God told Abram he will bless him with descendants; so many descendants that they will become a great nation. This was a big deal because Abram had no kids at that time and no one to carry on his name and memory.

We don't know why God chose to bless Abram instead of someone else, but in verse 3 God tells Abram the reason behind the blessing: "*all the peoples of earth will be blessed through you.*" God's blessings made Abram happy; but that's not the only reason God blessed him. God blessed Abram so that blessing would change the whole world.

Take a moment to think about your life and consider, "Has God blessed me? With Family or friends? Materially with enough to eat and clothes to wear?" You might not have as much as you like, but you have more than many in the

world. Have you responded to the Good News and do you know the presence of Jesus and the hope of heaven? How many of you would say you have been blessed by God? Me too, I've been blessed.

God tells us that "all the peoples of the world will be blessed through you." **Spiritually healthy people both receive and give blessings.** Whatever God blessed us with, we are to pass on to others. We are to breathe in blessings from God, then breathe out blessings to others. We receive God's love [*inhale*], then we are to give it away [*exhale*]; we receive God's forgiveness [*inhale*], then we forgive others [*exhale*]; we receive the Good news of Gospel (*inhale*) and then we share that Good News with others (*exhale*).

Jesus' first disciples saw Jesus risen from the dead. They had been blessed to know God and his power. And then Jesus told his followers to bless others: **Matthew 28:18-20** *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Some of us Christians somehow got the idea that the main point of following Jesus is to receive: to receive his forgiveness, joy, grace and protection. To breathe in blessings. But what happens if we don't exhale those blessings? What if we only breathe in (*inhale*)? We can't be healthy. Or, what happens if we only breathe out? We would pass out from lack of oxygen.

This principal of spiritual breathing is true for churches, as well as, for individuals. This became clear to me when I was on sabbatical in 2014. When I came back from sabbatical, I taught a message on "Crossroads as a 'breathing church.'" By that, I meant that we were called to gather for worship and training, then scatter out to make disciples; breathe in and breathe out.

How is that to happen? **God's strategy is that we bless others where we live, work and play.** God's strategy for reaching the world is for his people to go with love and power and bless others wherever they are; where we live, work and play:

- "Live": your street or wherever you lay your head
- "Work": where you put in your 40/50 hours per week
- "Play": where you spend your free time. Maybe where you do a hobby, but it could be a favorite restaurant that you like to hang out at or it could be a soccer field.

Today I want to get specific about *how* we can bless others in those places. It is summed up in the 5 words that spell out the word BLESS. “BLESS” is a simple strategy that will influence people toward Jesus.

The title of this series is 5 simple ways to bless the people where you live, work and play. The key word here is “SIMPLE.” It is simple to bless others. Anyone can do it, whether you live in Maputo, Mozambique or Moon Township. Each of us can do it, really! Here are the 5 simple ways to BLESS people where you live, work and play. To BLESS:

- **B-egin with prayer** - before we talk to people about God, we talk to God about people.
- **L-isten** - ask questions and learn about people’s stories - what they like to do and where they hurt and hope.
- **E-at** with people. Something good happens you eat together.
- **S-erve** - find a need and meet it.
- **S-tory** - tell your story and God’s story; that is, your testimony and the Gospel.

That’s it. That’s how the people around you will encounter Jesus.

We did a series on “BLESS” last summer. I’d be impressed if you remember that! We created a wall which was made up of 5,000 small pieces, each one standing for an act of kindness or spiritual conversation that you had. We’re not going to do that again this year. Instead, we’re speaking on BLESS again because we want to embed BLESS rhythms in our church’s culture, just like SOAP is a part of our culture.

If you’re new with us, SOAP is a pattern for meeting God in prayer and the Bible. We teach it in the Following Jesus or the other Equipping Track classes. We are, however, going to replace the “Sent” picture on the wall with the word BLESS so that we will be reminded all the time of God’s call to bless.

You should have a booklet in your bulletin that sums up what BLESS means, as well. It has been adapted from Westside Church in the St. Louis area, and we thank them (they adapted it from someone else).

As we talk about reaching out to bless people, let’s remind ourselves that **BLESS is a way to show love. *Romans 5:5-6* And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.**

God pours his love into us so we can pour it out to others. And this is how he approached us. We weren't looking for him. He, rather, was looking for us! We can sum up BLESS with this one phrase: **love people**. Loving people means that when we reach out to others, we accept them. We reach out to anyone regardless of who they are or what they look like. If all the people in our church are like you or me, then we have a problem. It means we are not reaching the people of our area. Alcoholics or Pepsi drinkers, gay or straight, people struggling with addictions or business execs; or, business executives who are struggling with addictions. God calls us to love others and invite them to join us as we follow Jesus.

But loving people can seem theoretical. BLESS offers us a few concrete ways to make that love real in the lives of the people we live, work and play with. The first of the five simple ways to help others toward Jesus is to **BEGIN with PRAYER**. We breathe in prayer and breathe out prayer. Breathe in prayer means to start by meeting with God ourselves.

Abram heard God speak to him about what God was going to do in his life. We don't know whether Abram heard God's voice audibly or in a vision or a dream, or just in the quietness of his thoughts. But hearing from God is a vital part of prayer. Prayer is a conversation with God, and a conversation means speaking and listening.

We recently finished a 6-part series on prayer, so I won't say a lot more about it right now. But let me just point to: **1 Thessalonians 5:17** "*pray continually.*" Praying continually doesn't mean to be on your knees 24/7, obviously. It simply means to be in continual contact with the Lord throughout the day. Think of it like having a smart phone, that is, when you have a smart phone, you are always available. When you have a smart phone, you can get a text, email or call at anytime. You're always in touch. When we pray continually, we are always in touch with God. Prayer isn't limited to a special devotional time.

To breathe in prayer, here's a simple approach. When we meet with the Lord, ask, "**What do you want to do in me?**" God is always at work in us, shaping us into the image of Jesus. It's like we're a life-long construction zone. **Philippians 1:6** tells us, *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* So, invite God to do his work in you. Intentionally cooperate with the Spirit by asking, "Lord, what do you want to do in me?" He will breathe his love into you more deeply, so you can breathe it out.

To breathe out prayer simply means to pray with and for others. To breathe out is to pray for what God is doing in the world. We can start by asking God, "**Who around me do you want to reach?**" God is active where we live, work and play, so let's pray for people in those places!

Pray for the neighborhood in which you live. If you are a follower of Jesus, *you* are God's strategy for reaching your street.

Pray for people where you work. Wherever you work, you are God's representative there. You are Jesus' strategy for reaching those who work at your company. Maybe you can't pray out loud at your desk, but you can pray silently or in the break room! You can sit in your car in the parking lot and pray before you go in. One Crossroads woman I know began praying at lunch with another woman about once per week and they are bringing the light of Jesus to their floor.

Pray for people where you play. Who do you see where you spend free time? Pray for the parents in the stands at games; listen and what's next? Pray for the coaches of the team, for the people at your favorite restaurant, wherever you go!

How do we do this? **Pray toward the pain.** Stay alert for who is hurting, and pray for that.

Recently we had some work done in our kitchen. When the contractor arrived, I saw that he was wearing a protective boot on his foot and walking with a significant limp. I asked him about it and he told me what happened. After he was working for a while, I went out and said, "Hey, I believe God heals, so can I pray for your foot?" He was a little surprised, but said "Sure." So I prayed for him, and when I was done, he smiled and thanked me for doing that. Then I had to leave. I would like to have heard about his next doctor's appointment. My praying for him was a way of responding to the pain.

A little over a year ago, our community was jolted when a Middle School student at West Allegheny committed suicide. Parents, students and teachers were all rattled over what happened. The next weekend two members of Crossroads decided to call a community prayer gathering at the school. They expected a handful of people to show up. Instead, hundreds of people showed up. They circled the school and prayed. It was an amazing morning. Through that experience, our youth pastors gained a stronger relationship with the school administration. One thing led to another, and our ministry team was given permission to start an after-school ministry called iLead. Our Radiance campaign provided the funding needed.

Each week, volunteers and staff meet with about 100 students after school and provide fun, teaching and small groups. They are basically doing the ELEVATE Student Ministry experience right in the school. There are some guidelines to observe, but our team has had an amazing opportunity to reach kids who would have never come to the church. Those students are getting the hope and love of Jesus! Only God knows how iLead is changing their future and the futures of their own kids some day.

All that impact began in prayer for a pain point. Two women see the tragedy of suicide and knew that prayer was the right response. What would it mean to respond with prayer to the opioid epidemic? What would it mean to respond with prayer to the thousands of people who are living apart from Jesus?

Another way to breathe out prayer is through a **Prayer walk**. Prayer walk means to walk through an area and pray for all the people there. It is sometimes referred to as praying on-sight with insight. It is not hard to do this. Perhaps your small group could talk a walk through the neighborhood in which you are meeting and pray for it. It doesn't need to be obvious what you are doing. You don't need to order matching T-shirts and carry a bull horn. You just walk normally through the area and pray quietly as you go. You can break up into pairs and cover more of the area with less notice.

On the times I take a walk by myself in our neighborhood, I will pray for the people who live in the houses I pass. I try to stay aware of any promptings from God about specific ways I should pray. But to anyone watching me, I am just getting a little exercise (which is true, I'm doing that too).

I know about one missionary in France that gets up at 5:30am every day and walks for two hours through the streets of his town praying. He attracts some attention because he wears a big cowboy hat, which is a novelty in France. People have found out what he is doing, and now some stop and ask him for prayer.

Call out a name to God and ask one thing: **Pray that God creates spiritual curiosity in them.** Pray for people to wonder if there really is a God, and for how they might find him. Pray for people to wonder if Jesus really rose from the dead, or if there is something more to life than what they are experiencing. The Holy Spirit is the one who calls people to Jesus, and when we pray that others become spiritually curious, that can lead to life change!

I didn't grow up in a Christ-centered family. Even now, I am the only follower of Jesus in my family. I have always wondered, "Why me?" I'm grateful, for sure. But why me? I believe part of the answer to that question is that someone, somewhere prayed for me. I don't know who it is, but I am pretty sure that someone prayed for me.

Now, I am praying for other people. I am praying for our community. This week I was reminded of how I used to climb the hill outside our building and look over this area and pray for God to reach this community. And he has. And he wants to do so to a greater degree than ever before.

Will you join me in praying for the people where you live, work and play? You've been blessed. And there is a reason for that. God wants to bless others through you!