



## What Does it Mean to Bless and to Curse?

**The whole world awaits blessing from us as encouragement to life**



*What does it mean to bless, and why is it necessary? What happens when we curse our neighbors? Archimandrite Savva (Mazhuko) reflects.*

It's a pity that no one warned us before entering the Church of what we're about to face. In America the police are obliged to read rights to those being arrested, as we know from the movies (and some from personal experience). No one reads rights to those joining the Church; no one is warned that he will be deprived once and for all of some of these rights. First comes faith, and *then* comes understanding. The encounter with Christ changes us and awakens faith in us, but understanding of that which threatens us, of the gifts and losses – this is revealed later, not immediately, by level of maturity, *unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* (Ephesians 4:13).

Christians are defective and rights confound them, because they do not possess an absolutely natural law, accessible to anyone: the right to hate, to legitimate anger. Moreover, we are not only forbidden to hate, the Lord requires more of us. He wants more than restraint in malice, not simply the elementary norms of decency, not simply a suppression of hostility. He commands us – and this is namely a commandment, i.e., a prescription – to bless our enemies, and this is imputed to us as a duty.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior teaches: if we want to be true children of our Heavenly Father, we need to fulfill the commandment: *Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44). This is very important: not just to tolerate, to cope with, to put up with, trying to understand and forgive – that is, to



endure bravely, taking a passive and martyric position; rather, actively to wish good to evil-doers, affirming it with benevolent actions. All the while loving, blessing, doing good and praying sincerely, from all one's heart, without hypocrisy.

If we were talking about relationships with neighbors, friends, co-religionists, then we might still be able to put up with all this; but I'm to pour out all this fervent love upon whom? Upon enemies! Upon those who curse, hate, and persecute me, who glibly and irrepressibly want to do, and do, evil towards me. How is this possible? Why don't we have the legal right to hate?



Here the Prophet Isaiah laments: *Woe unto me! the treacherous dealers have dealt treacherously; yea, the treacherous dealers have dealt very treacherously* (Isaiah 24:16). Eloquently stated. Powerful. Everyone knows this picture. If you have a brother or sister, then at least once in your life you've been ready to polish them off. I have three brothers, and there've been times when I've seriously thought about beating them up. That was in childhood.

The older we get, the more sophisticated our malefactions become. We're betrayed, we're bullied, we're humiliated, and we can still tolerate this; but when you see your neighbors jeered at, when people are rude to your parents, when children are tortured and killed – even if not your own, but living people are tormented – how can one tolerate this? How can we bless evil-doers? There's a line in Andrei Dementyev: "Before the formidable memory of humans, the river of hatred overflowed."



This is about people who have lived through the horrors of war, and we've always been told that their right to hatred is sacred: they've seen the death of loved ones, torture, executions, killings, and they've suffered hunger and know the price of bread. What can we, prosperous citizens, say to these people, how can we bring to them the commandment of loving one's enemies? I don't know. It seems to me that we can't speak about love for one's enemies; one needs actually to see it at least once. Christian antiquity preached not so much by words, as by actions. People saw the faces and eyes of those who burned with love for man, in whom there wasn't even the shadow of hatred for enemies and persecutors.

Our ingenious contemporary, Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev – translator, theologian, and just good Christian – told his friend and spiritual father about his own personal experience of blessing. On an ordinary day he stood at the window of his apartment and looked at the quietly hurrying Muscovites – students, elderly women, people selling piroshky, taxi drivers, policemen, a girl in a beret, a sad kid with a briefcase – and suddenly Sergei Sergeevich felt an uncontrollable desire to bless everyone he saw, every person, from joy that they existed, lived, and moved.

Note that Averintsev, an academic, polyglot, and polymath, had every reason to despise these swarming people, such as Hesse's or Sartre's famous characters did, for whom these vulgar, uneducated little people – these vulgar creatures, mired in the swamp of popular culture – awakened only nausea. But here our academic wanted to bless them.

There will certainly be people who'll want to point out that, in fact, Averintsev showed arrogance, albeit of a special kind: religious arrogance. I, who am a knowledgeable theologian – “Have you read the *Timaeus*?” “I translated it!” – have every right to bless this ignorant crowd, to condescend to their dull life with my highfalutin blessing. Whoever has seen or read Averintsev would never say that. He was a good Christian. He was real. However, let us note an important point that might not be entirely conscious, but locates for us the experience of blessing: the right time and hierarchy.

Present in the act of blessing is a hidden element of hierarchy. We read in Scripture: *And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better* (Hebrews 7:7). The elder has the right to bless the younger in the hierarchy. That we receive blessings for the most part in the right context is supported by our churchly talk. We say: “Batiushka didn't bless,” i.e., he didn't allow or permit; “we don't have a blessing to feed the poor,” i.e., it's not permitted.

Our parents, as senior in the hierarchy, express their consent to marriage or to entering a monastery by blessing their children. Their blessing, as it were, legitimizes the children's decision. The right to bless emphasizes the special authority to bless. But this still doesn't explain to us what blessing means in and of itself. That I have the right to write novels doesn't explain what creativity in itself is. Contemporary churchly talk witnesses to the fact that a legal understanding of blessing prevails in our minds. But there is also another kind, which we'll call charismatic.

For an explanation, let's return to Averintsev. In his case, the desire to bless with not symptomatic of conscious power, of his own greatness, from which he condescended to the mob or crowd; his need to bless came not from the heights, but from a superabundance of kindness, of active benevolence towards people.



Even children are able to distinguish the two obvious parts of the word “blessing” [*blagoslovenie*]: “*blago*,” i.e., “good,” and “*slovo*,” i.e., “word.” Our Russian word “to bless” [*blagoslovit*] corresponds to the Greek word “eulogein,” made up of “eu” (“good”) and “logoV” (“word”). The Latin “*benedicare*” is similarly constructed: “*bene*” means “good” and “*dictum*” means “word” or “expression.” The Russian word “*blago*” is now considered dated and poorly understood, but it can be replaced by the more understandable “*dobro*,” for “*dobro-slovie*” [“good-wording”] instead of “*blagoslovenie*.”

What does all this mean? Does blessing mean pronouncing good words, gentle expressions, and courteous phrases? It’s obvious that blessings are more than compliments, although even simple courtesy and kind treatment mean a lot; each of us, even the strongest, sometimes need a kind and encouraging word. But a blessing, as understood by Christians, necessarily comes from the heart, out of its overflowing goodness: *out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh* (Matthew 12:34).

That is, before the point of blessing [“good-wording”], one needs to be filled with good intentions towards all, a good disposition, which is not selective, but flares out in irrepressible jubilation, wonder, and gratitude when looking at all things living. This is how the Lord looks upon us, and the Savior calls us to such a view: *That ye may be the children of your Father Which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust* (Matthew 5:45).

Good words impute responsibility to us. It also emboldens us to bless God, that is, to be surprised and delighted in Him and – if one can put it this way – to encourage Him to life. How often these daring words ring out in church: “Bless the Lord, O my soul”! What does all this mean? Why is this important? How does this work? How it works, we don’t know; but *that* it works, we know for certain. Blessing is a kind of utterance/action, statement/willing. There is some kind of power in this good-wording.

It seems to me that genuine blessing is a gust of life. By blessing, we share our lives, as it were; we by no means lose the power to live but, on the contrary, in this dedication and sacrifice of good resemble the Creator, becoming partakers of divine life ourselves. In the gust of blessing, the cycle of life in nature that is the circuit of life is accomplished; in the Christian worldview, love and life and identical, they are exactly the same. How aptly A. K. Tolstoy put it:

*And with prophetic heart I understood,*

*That all is born of the Word,*

*Rays of love turn in circle,*

*Longing to return again to him.*

By blessing friends, enemies, cats, and giraffes, we enter this sacred cycle of life and love; we act in divine ministry, that is, we fulfill our direct service in this world, that of the children of God, His heirs, kings, and priests. The Apostle Paul has the most comprehensible definition of love: *Love worketh no ill to his neighbor* (Romans 13:10). But simply “not doing” isn’t much. Blessing is the active desire for good to the whole world; it is an action in and of itself. And the right and obligation to bless belongs to everyone, not just to priests.



To bless is not just a matter of correctly placing one's hands and uttering the sacred formulas. The entire world awaits blessing, good-wording, good-doing, and good-wishing. Blessing is man's natural reaction to that which exists and is; it is a grace-filled delight in that which is alive. To bless means to embrace in one's arms all the children of God, and God, and oneself; to good-word and to "kiss all things in the universe," sometimes with gratitude, sometimes with sorrow and tears, because our world has been struck by disease and is therefore even more in need of our blessing.

An outlook and heart of blessing should therefore be cultivated. This is a kind of spiritual exercise, when I begin every morning with blessing and glorification, hugging and kissing God and the world through prayer and thanksgiving. There's nothing unique in this. After all, we are all God's children and, getting up and going to bed, it's natural for children to hug their parents, brothers, and sisters. All our hurts and disappointments are within a single family, and we somehow all understand. Papa can reconcile everyone.

The whole world awaits our blessing as encouragement for life. This isn't just our mission, it's also our gift; and, as with every gift, it can be distorted. Many people are afraid of curses, and rightly so. A curse is a blessing in reverse. If a blessing gives life, a curse is capable of taking away this life. Cursing isn't good-wording; it's evil-wording. Just how close these two different actions are can be seen from the Latin: *benedictum* is blessing (good-wording); and *maledictum* is cursing (evil-wording).

Blessing is encouragement to live; cursing is the denial of life, the active wish and desire for non-being. In this sense, the palpably rough and threatening "knock you in the kisser" is less dangerous than the intellectually fastidious "may you croak." A classic example of cursing can be found in the Book of Job. Crushed by troubles, the loss of children, and suddenly poor, lonely, and sick, Job "opened his mouth, and cursed his day":

*Let the day perish wherein I was born,*

*and the night in which it was said,*

*"There is a man-child conceived."*

*Let that day be darkness,*

*let not God regard it from above,*

*neither let the light shine upon it.*

*Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it,*

*let a cloud dwell upon it,*

*let the darkness of the day terrify it.*

*As for that night, let darkness seize upon it,*

*let it not be joined unto the days of the year,*



*let it not come into the number of the months.*

*Lo, let that night be solitary,*

*let no joyful voice come therein.*

*Let them curse it that curse the day,*

*who are ready to raise up their mourning (Job 3:3-8).*

Note well: Job curses his birthday! However terrible this is, it's a very modern thing: many will understand it, as it's often expressed in hatred for one's parents for giving one birth. *Let the day perish wherein I was born.* This day shouldn't have been. Job, as it were, crosses out his own existence, cursing himself, refusing to be, denying the existence of all his ages, states, and events.

Just like blessing, cursing also somehow works, although we don't know how. By cursing, we smash holes in the very fabric of life – whether our own, or those of our neighbors. But sometimes we really want to curse. There are days when we allow ourselves this dangerous evil-wording, cursing our country, children, neighbors, enemies, and city. This is an active desire for evil, capable of causing harm to life.

It's frightful even to think of this, but giving place to evil, willing it to life – this is something completely terrible and completely unworthy of man's vocation. And it would be very frightful to live on earth, if the Lord Himself didn't lay down boundaries to cursing. After all, it isn't we alone who can curse, but we too can be cursed – and this is sobering, frightening, and alarming. But the phrase from the Book of Proverbs is very comforting: *As the bird by wandering, as the swallow by flying, so the curse causeless shall not come* (Proverbs 26:2).

Yes, we have many causes for cursing; but both the world and God await of us not only restraint from evil, but also active good-wording. The genuine Christian is like a tree: as trees allow us to breathe by releasing oxygen, so too should Christ's disciples pour out blessing around them, radiating kindness and goodwill. Just as it's natural for people to breathe, so should it be natural for Christians to bless; the habit of good should take root in us, so that we can simply not wish evil, but not even think about it.

The great Janusz Korczak wrote in his diary: "I never wished anyone evil, and I don't know how this is done." You read and don't believe it! Could there really be such people who don't even know what it is to wish people ill? It turns out that there are, and Dr. Korczak is witness to it. It's hard to say if it's within our power to accustom ourselves to blessing, to constancy in good. It's perfectly possible that this grace-filled gift, which can't be taken by force, can only be asked for. But weaning ourselves from evil-wording and evil-wishing – this is within our powers; this we can handle.

*Translated from the [Russian](#)*