

A Sermon Delivered at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
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Psalm 67

Mark Us With Blessing

Have you made your treaty with God yet?

Have you ever thought that your relationship with God, or even with other people, might be like an ancient treaty?

You might be surprised to learn that the heart of the relationship between God and God's people described in the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures was based on an even more ancient Assyrian or Suzerain treaties between a king or lord or conqueror and the people they cared for and ruled.

Open your Bible sometime and read through the book of Deuteronomy. A lot of this book is modeled after ancient treaties or contracts between the ruled and the ruler.

In many of these ancient treaties, there were distinct parts of a very orderly relationship. They often started with a story about what a ruler had done for or to a people that resulted in that ruler becoming the leader of a people. There were statements of so-called facts about how the relationship came into being. There was also this section called "blessings and curses." It's not hard to imagine what was recited in this section—it's the place where the ruler made promises to the ruled and visa versa followed immediately by a section about all the bad things that would happen if the people being ruled didn't follow through on their duties or if they were disloyal. It's much like our modern contracts or even the laws that legislative bodies write—benefits of the contract or law are stipulated and penalties for not living up to the contract or obeying the law are described.

When I was a child, in order to earn my allowance I had to do certain chores—clean up my room every week, take out the garbage, help clean the house on Saturday mornings, and even shovel the coal into the furnace. I also had to help my older sister, Nan, with the dishes after dinner. I like to dry! If I didn't do all my chores, I didn't get all or any of my allowance. Blessings and curses. I have to say, while I was a child I didn't very much like doing chores. I preferred to sleep in or go out and play with my best friend, Marc, or watch Sky King and Penny on the television on Saturday mornings. But, I also liked those things that the allowance I earned could buy me, like cool tires, a banana seat, and high rise handle bars for my Schwinn bicycle. What I didn't like was having empty pockets or being in the dog house with my Mom or Dad. Blessings and curses.

Now we more progressive Christians probably don't much like to think that our relationship with God is based solely on a contract that if God does such and such for us then we will do such and such for God. Or, if we behave and believe in a certain way God will take care of us. I doubt that many of you, when you pray, say to God, "Well, God, if you give me that new job or that new car or heal my pain I will do this and that for you." We don't often say, as the ancient Psalmist sang, *mark us with your blessing God*. Or, we might think it or pray for it,

but it's not often that we think that we are making a treaty or contract with God in order just to get God's blessings.

Yet, folks, much of our early literature about a people's relationship with God was based upon an ancient form of give and take. Again, read the book of Deuteronomy sometime and see if you can pick out the historical prologue, the Blessings and Curses, etc.

Christianity is known for this little thing called "grace."

We like to say that grace is "freely given." By this we mean, that God loves us so very much and God's love is unconditional. God's love and blessings are given to us even though we broken people could hardly ever earn blessings from God. Despite all that we do to hurt other people, or hurt ourselves, and sometimes we worship other things more than we worship God. Still, God just keeps loving us, forgiving us, and blessing us. Grace happens, we believe. Grace is a good thing. Our reading from *The Message* version of the Psalm this morning tells us, "God, mark us with grace and blessing! Smile!"

Folks, I would much rather operate under a system of grace. My faith tells me that no matter how much I mess up God will still love me. It's not that God's love is all sweetness and light. No, in fact sometimes God's love can be the "tough" kind of love where the waters God leadeth me by are not always still. Sometimes they are turbulent. But, usually when I have passed through those turbulent waters I find that I have learned something about life, about myself, about God that helps me be a better person, or at least get back on a path of goodness, healing, and joy. God's grace may be free, but it may not always be a bed of roses. And when those thorny bushes bloom they can be truly beautiful.

I encourage, you my friends, to walk through this life with your eyes wide open to the blessings and curses from God, your sovereign. Don't think of the curses as punishments, but rather as blessings of grace, too, that will help mold you and make you the kind of person you can feel good about. Be aware of the blessings and graces God gives you and give thanks. Think about them every day, perhaps just before you nod off to sleep. The more awake and aware we can be to God's graces and blessings, and even to the lessons we learn, the richer and more meaningful our lives will be. And, the closer in relationship to God we will be.

God, let people thank and enjoy you! Let all the people thank and enjoy you! Amen.