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THE MAGIC PILL

Luke 17:11-19

It seemed like the perfect product. The ads featured a beautiful actress who affirmed it. All one had to do, the ad said, was sprinkle it on your food like you would use salt and pepper. You wouldn’t have to deprive yourself of the foods you love to eat. No need to use diuretics or drugs. Just use this product and you could eat whatever you want and still lose weight. It came with a money back guarantee. It would even support a healthy metabolism. It almost sounded too good to be true. That’s because it was, according to the Federal Trade Commission. They sued the product maker for false advertising. The company settled the suit by paying $26.5 million. The FTC also sued a company that sold a supposed “slimming cream,” another that sold a supposed hormone treatment and still another with a colon cleanse, all of which claimed great weight loss results, and all of which ended up paying millions.

Another classic says, “Cure arthritis with without drugs with this all natural, government approved remedy.” The FTC said it was yet another scam. People are constantly thinking there is some magical pill or process out there that is a quick and easy fix to weight loss, arthritis, diabetes, cancer, ulcers, baldness, prostate problems and more. There is a long history of elixirs, potions, pills with supposedly almost miraculous power to cure anything and everything that in reality are just capable of separating people from their money. Watch out if a product is promoted using terms like scientific breakthrough, ancient remedy, vague scientific sounding words like thermo genesis, or if they say this is a secret pharmaceutical companies don’t want you to know.

Having said that, today I want to talk about an ancient remedy for much of what ails us. It’s not a pill, but it is powerful, and it’s not a scam. Pharmaceutical companies do not care if you know about this. If anything, they’d probably be happy if you do know about it. We will see it in action in Luke 17:11-19.

A DESPERATE GROUP APPEALED TO JESUS

This incident occurred when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem from the northern part of Israel. On the way he traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. There was great animosity and prejudice between the Jewish people and the people of Samaria. Typically when traveling south to Jerusalem the Jewish people would skirt Samaritan territory, like Jesus apparently did here. As he did so he encountered a group of 10 men whose life was a nightmare. All of them had leprosy.

Leprosy was a disturbing disease back then, and continues to be unsettling for people today. Still today 15,000 people are diagnosed with the disease every year in the world. Brazil, Indonesia and India lead the world in cases. Armadillos in the southern United States often have the disease, so be careful of contact with them. The true disease, the worst form of it, known as Hansen’s Disease today, is caused by bacteria and actually is hard to catch. It can be treated and cured by antibiotics.

In Jesus 'day the term leprosy was used more loosely and was often applied to various skin conditions, some of which were very contagious. The fear of the worst form of it caused victims of the disease to be ostracized. They were banned from contact with other people. I have a good friend in our neighborhood who is a great guy and a follower of Jesus. This past summer he and his family got to have a vacation on Maui. He loved Maui. However, he didn’t get to enjoy it as much as he would have liked. The third day there he got Covid. The rest of the vacation he was quarantined. No one wanted to get Covid, so he had to stay by himself in his bedroom with little to no contact with others. The current form of Covid is not real dangerous, yet my friend was essentially banned.

You have to feel bad for these 10 men. They are dealing with a terrible disease that had no cure in that day, and they were cut off from their previous lives. They couldn’t be with the people they loved, those who loved them. They had no real hope of that changing. Apparently they had heard about Jesus. They knew that he had healed truckloads of people with all kinds of severe conditions, including blindness and crippling diseases. So when Jesus came within hailing distance they called out to him, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us.”

I have a disease for which there was no effective treatment 15 years ago, maybe even 10. Doctors would have done what they could to try to treat it, but it would not have been very effective. A few weeks ago I met with a doctor who offered a treatment that, while not guaranteed, has been shown to be effective in the majority of cases. It was not hard to choose to try that treatment. A couple of people have told me that this treatment itself has potential for causing some dangerous reactions. But the choice seems pretty easy to me. I can either take the risk or let the disease run its fatal course. That doesn’t seem to be a tough call to me. For these suffering men, they had a choice that was a no-brainer. They could appeal to Jesus, not knowing if he actually could do anything about it, or they could die from the disease. In their desperation, calling out to Jesus for help was obvious.

Jesus responded to them by telling them to go show themselves to a priest. The Law of Moses required that when someone believed they had been healed of a skin condition, including leprosy, they had to go to a priest for confirmation that they were indeed healed. After the priest declared them clean they could rejoin society and go back to their lives. Telling them to see the priest was a way of letting them know that Jesus was granting their request and was healing them.

All 10 of them immediately set out to see a priest. In their condition they would be eager, even desperate, to believe they were healed. They would grasp at any straw. They were thinking, “Hey, maybe we really are better. It’s worth a try, because it’s the only hope we have.”

ONE PERSON HAD THE RIGHT RESPONSE

While they were on the way to see the priest something truly astounding happened. They realized that what they had hoped for had actually happened. They were healed of leprosy. Leprosy attacks the nerves, so I suspect they began to feel different, better, as their nerves were healed. They could probably look at each other and see that there were visible signs of healing. No doubt it seemed too good to be true, but they began to realize it was true. Jesus had healed all 10 of them!

One of them was a Samaritan. Isn’t it interesting that while there was great animosity between Jews and Samaritans, when a hideous disease threatened their lives and made them outcasts, those barriers broke down. Their identity now was they were lepers, and among lepers it didn’t matter much whether one was Jew or Samaritan.

This Samaritan did something different than the rest of the group. Most of the group continued on to see the priest and have their miraculous cure verified. But the Samaritan turned around to go back to Jesus. He was overwhelmed with gratitude that his life had been restored, so for him the first priority was to go back and thank Jesus for what he had done. He went back shouting praise to God for what had happened, and when he found Jesus he fell at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. That seems like a no-brainer, doesn’t it? Jesus had literally saved his life. He was released from a prison that he thought he could never escape. To him, he had no choice but to go back and thank the one who saved him.

Jesus’ reaction confirmed that the man did the right thing. Jesus said, “Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” He was affirming that coming back, praising God and giving thanks was the right way to respond to such a priceless gift of healing. It was what all of them should have done.

Jesus asked a good question. Where were the other 9? They were on their way to see the priest. Why didn’t they do what that one Samaritan did? They could have said, “We were just doing what Jesus told us to do. He said we should go show ourselves to the priest, so that’s what we did.” That was true, but there was surely something else at work. They were anxious to get their lives back. Having the priest declare them healed and clean meant they could rejoin society, they could be reunited with their loved ones. They could get on with life. That was the priority for them. But Jesus affirmed that there was a greater priority. Thanking him and praising God for the wonderful thing that had happened should have taken precedence over getting on with their lives, but for 90% of them it didn’t.

There is a lesson there for us. Very often our desire to get on with our lives, to fix whatever is off and to get back to the life we want takes precedence. We forget about thanking God because we want to get on with our lives so much.

IMPLICATIONS

GIVING THANKS SHOULD TAKE PRIORITY

Jesus made clear in this passage that giving thanks to God is of primary importance. Yes, seeing the priest so they could be declared clean was a necessary step for them to take. Certainly Jesus wanted these men to be able to return to their lives, which was why he healed them. But the way he did it was intended to teach the importance of giving thanks. Why tell them to go see the priest and then be healed on the way instead of just healing them on the spot?

In Matthew 8:2-4 we see another encounter with a leper. “A man with leprosy came and knelt before him (Jesus) and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said, ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.” Jesus could have done that with the 10 men. Why tell them to go see a priest and have them be healed while on the way? He wanted to make the point about the importance of giving thanks.

In Psalm 69:30-31 David said, “I will praise God’s name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox, more than a bull with its horns and hooves.” It was common for ancient Jews to think offering sacrifices to God was what was most important. It is typical of people that we think doing some ritual, especially if it involves some sacrifice, is what appeases God. Offering an ox or a bull would have been a really big sacrifice. But that Psalm says that glorifying God with thanksgiving pleases the Lord more than any sacrifice, more than any ritual or religious duty.

A familiar verse in the New Testament says the same thing. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” People always want to know what God’s will is. We think of his will in regard to decisions we make. Should I marry this person, should I take this job, should I buy this house? But this verse says God’s will is something else entirely. It is that we give thanks. We are to do that in all circumstances. This is to be a habit of life, our mind set, our temperament.

When you get to spend time with your children and grandchildren, give thanks. When you have a wonderful family gathering for the Thanksgiving holiday, give thanks. But it’s not just those good things we are to give thanks for. Give thanks no matter what happens. I was thinking about the Thanksgiving holiday. I recalled the first two Thanksgivings when Laurie was a part of my life. The first of the two we were not married, but had a budding relationship. Long story, but the week before Thanksgiving I traveled to Dallas to play in a football game. While there I came down with the flu. At the end of that trip I had to fly home feeling awful. My plan had been to go to Bakersfield to have Thanksgiving with my parents, but I scrapped that plan. I felt terrible. That Thanksgiving Day I had a Swanson’s enchilada TV dinner that I heated up in the oven all alone in my apartment. Nothing about that was wonderful. A year later my life was hugely improved, as I was married to Laurie. However, Thanksgiving wasn’t much better. Somehow I got the flu again. Laurie’s family was camping out in the desert at Borrego and wanted us to join them for their Thanksgiving dinner at the camp site. So feeling miserable, I drove with Laurie out to Borrego, sat outside bundled up as warmly as I could be, shivered and felt horrible. I have no idea what we ate. I have no recollection of eating. I just remember feeling terrible. How did God want me to respond to those crummy circumstances? He wanted me to give thanks. He surely did not want me to give thanks for being sick and miserable, but in spite of it. He emphasizes giving thanks, no matter what. He wants the expression of gratitude to him to be at the very core of our character.

When my dermatologist called me in early October and told me that after two months of uncertainty, it had been determined that I had malignant melanoma, I admit my first reaction was not, “Thank you, Lord.” When you’re sick at Thanksgiving, when you get bad news from a doctor, our normal reaction is not to be thankful. God wants us to give thanks at times that are not necessarily good and joyful of themselves because he wants us to be continually thankful for the things he does in our lives that are good, things that are still true even when our circumstances might be unpleasant. This tells us there is something about giving thanks that is so important that God makes it a central component of doing his will.

Biblical scholar P. T. O’Brien wrote that Thanksgiving is “almost a synonym for the Christian life.” If you are not giving thanks to God in everything, you are not living the Christian life. Another scholar said for a Christian not to be thankful is abnormal. This raises the question of why it is so important to give thanks to God in everything.

GIVING THANKS ORIENTS US CORRECTLY TO GOD

Laurie and I are impressed with the verbal ability of our 3 year old grandson, Wesley. He was born a month early, so in some areas of development he has been just a bit behind. That was true of walking, although you’d never know that now because he flies around at a million miles an hour most of the time. It was true of speaking as well, but you’d never know it now. Laurie brought over to his house a toy truck that Toby got from a cereal box when he was a boy. It is a 1930’s era delivery truck. Wesley loved it and called it an old-fashioned truck. How does a 3 year old come up with “old-fashioned”? He does stuff like that all the time. However, there are some words that his parents are working on with him. They are please and thank you. There’s nothing like having a 3 year old issue an order to you, “Give me milk.” It changes everything when they say, “Give me milk, please,” and then say “thank you” when you comply with their request. Without the please and thank you it sends the message that they are the center of the universe, their wishes are all that matter, and you exist to serve them.

When we fail to say, “Thank you” to God we essentially do the same thing that 3 year old does. We say we are the center of the universe, our wishes are all that matter, and God, and everything else for that matter, exists to serve our wishes. Failing to have a character formed by the habit of giving thanks to God at all times, lands us right where Satan wants us, making ourselves out to be the center of all things.

One of the most profound truths in the Bible is found in Romans 1:21. That is in a section where Paul is describing the plight of humanity. He says, “their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” He goes on to say, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.” Consider how terrible that is. What does it mean for one’s thinking to become futile? It means that no matter how supposedly smart a person is, no matter how high their IQ is, no matter how clever they might be, their supposed intelligence will lead them into a dead end.

The ancient Greeks could see this as all too characteristic of the human race. They depicted it in the myth of Sisyphus. He was the founder and first king of Ephyra, later known as Corinth. He was devious and violent, eventually thought he could outsmart even Zeus, the leader of the mythological gods. For his hubris, he was condemned to roll a large boulder up a mountain, but just before he got it to the top it would roll back down. He would spend eternity pointlessly trying to roll that rock up the mountain. This was the true story of rock and roll!

In an essay, philosopher Albert Camus wrote that Sisyphus personifies the absurdity of human life. He drew some other conclusions that he later realized were wrong, but the point is, he depicts the futility of human existence. We think we are clever, smarter than God, but somehow we never get the rock all the way up the mountain. The human race makes huge advances in knowledge and technology, and ends up struggling with the same issues.

We keep trying the same things over and over again in new ways that always bring us to a dead end. We don’t find ourselves at last having true peace, filled with meaning and joy, loving one another. Professing to be wise, we show ourselves to be foolish and all too often dark.

The crucial insight is to see how this futility came about. Verse 21 says, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.” That’s where it starts. When we don’t put God in the center and give thanks to him, we have immediately joined Sisyphus in his futility and darkness. We can either give thanks to God, or we can live a futile, absurd, joyless existence. But how are we supposed to thank God when we are not thankful for something that is happening?

Years ago Laurie and I went to visit Michael and Carissa when Michael was stationed in Mississippi, serving as a flight instructor at Meridian Naval Air Station. They loved to get out of Meridian every chance they got. So while we were visiting with them one July, we all went down to one of their favorite places, Pensacola, Florida. We planned to spend a couple of days enjoying the beautiful beach. The first day we were there it was cold, raining and windy. Mind you, this is July in Florida. Cold and raining in Florida in July? There was no going to the beach that day. We weren’t especially thankful for the weather. However, we were getting to spend time with Michael and Carissa. That was really the point, and that was fun even if the weather wasn’t. We went to the air museum in Pensacola and just had a great day being together. The point I want to make is that we were thankful for something bigger than the weather. We were thankful for getting to spend time with Michael and Carissa, and that blessing, giving thanks for the joy of it, outweighed the disappointment of lousy weather for the beach.

There are going to be good days and bad days, blessings and trials for all of it. But we can give thanks to God for his grace given to us in Christ, for his love for us, for his presence with us, for the hope he has given us in Christ, for his truth to guide us and many more. These things are the foundation of our lives. They are greater than any of the disappointments and hardships of life. As we give thanks to God for them it reminds us that we are not the center of all things, that we do not deserve to have God catering to our whims or desires, that we are here to honor him no matter what. That resets our attitudes and our thinking and orients us properly toward God, ourselves and life.

GIVING THANKS PRODUCES JOY

Psalm 9:1-2 says, “I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.” Note that David said he would give thanks to God, then linked that with “I will be glad and rejoice in you.” Wouldn’t you like to rejoice and be glad? David connects that with giving thanks to God with all his heart.

I think there is a similar connection that showed up in 1 Thessalonians 5. In verse 16 Paul said, “Rejoice always.” The Greek word translated “rejoice” is sometimes translated “be glad.” Always be glad. That’s much like the song, “Don’t worry, be happy.” To be glad is to be happy. Who wouldn’t want to be happy all the time, to be glad and rejoice? Everyone wants that. But let’s be honest. Nobody is happy all the time. When you’re sitting in an oncologist’s office waiting for him to come and tell you the results of tests that could be very bad news, you’re not glad to be there. You’re not feeling happy. At least I wasn’t..

There’s a scene in one of the *Ice Age* movies that features two possums, Crash and Eddie, in the middle of the cataclysms depicted in the movie, being hilariously carefree. At one point they are on the top of two very tall trees that fall over and they ride them all the way to the ground. They end up laughing and saying, “That was awesome!” A friend questions them about how they can seem to be so silly and so unconcerned with the destruction going on and possible impending death. One turns to the other and says, “Can I tell him?” Then he turns to their friend and says, “We’re very, very stupid.”

That’s how most people would think you’d have to be to be glad and rejoicing all the time. You’d have to be out of touch with reality. But In the next 2 verses Paul tells us what we need to do to be able to rejoice continually. In verse 17 he says, “Pray continually.” Never stop praying. Pray about everything. Then in verse 18 he says, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” The act of giving thanks actually is key to experiencing joy. Pastor and writer, John Yates, said, “A thankful spirit produces a joyful person.”

Research has shown that making a choice of will to give thanks leads to a more positive, joyful attitude as well as positively affecting our health and our relationships. One study determined that making a habit of giving thanks reduced the amount of cortisol in your body. Cortisol plays a role in producing belly fat. So giving thanks can actually reduce belly fat. Now there’s a reason to rejoice.

Too often we don’t realize that God wants us to experience joy. He wants us to be people characterized by joy. Giving thanks turns out to be a crucial step for experiencing joy. I was amazed by one study I came across. They divided the subjects into 3 groups. They asked them to take 5 minutes every day for a week to think about some things. One group was to think about whatever they felt like, another was to think about things that bothered them, the third group was to think about and write down 3 specific things they were thankful for that day. At the end of the week they tested them on their level of happiness. The third group, the ones who gave thanks, were significantly happier than either of the other two. They tested them all 3 months later, and found that even though they were not taking the 5 minutes each day, that group was still significantly happier. They tested them 6 months later and found out it was still true, even though they hadn’t been writing down their thanks for half a year! Just a week of that affected them for 6 months. If you want to have more joy, spend time giving thanks!

Psalm 118:1 says, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” We can give thanks to God every moment because he is good. We need to remember that James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” Every good thing is a gift from God. In his monumental volume *The Existence And Attributes Of God,* Puritan theologian, Stephen Charnock, wrote of God’s goodness, “All created goodness is a rivulet from this fountain.” In other words, all good stems from God, who is the source of all good.

Our house is 32 years old. In 32 years a house settles. As it does this stresses the construction in places. In our living room with its 20 foot high ceilings, there was one corner that had a crack that ran all the way to the ceiling. There was another place where some flashing on a corner and the bottom of one part of ceiling had pulled loose. It started as a small crack, but this year it started to resemble the Grand Canyon. One option was for me to try to address these problems. It took a nano second for Laurie to nix that idea. Rick on a ladder 20 feet in the air. What could go wrong? Not to mention that Rick really wasn’t sure how to fix the cracks. Laurie contacted a painter. Our living room hadn’t been painted in more than 15 years. The painter came and in a couple of days fixed all the cracks and painted the living room and some other parts of the house for a very reasonable price. Was that a good thing? Yes, it was very good. It was good that people have that ability. And that is ultimately a rivulet from the fountain of God’s goodness. We thanked the painter, and we thanked God for the painter.

One night recently as we were getting into bed Laurie said, “I love our bed.” We bought a new mattress last year. It is way more comfortable than what we had before. We sleep really well on it. That is a good thing. It is a rivulet from the fountain of God’s goodness. We thank God for that mattress. When you start cataloguing the good things in your life you will find out that you have nearly infinite reasons to give thanks to God. And as you do that, you are going to find that somehow your mindset switches from negative to positive, complaining to rejoicing.

A few years ago Laurie and I had the rare privilege of flying first class on a long flight home from vacation. It was only the second time in our lives that we’ve flown first class. It was obviously way more comfortable than back in steerage where we actually belong and usually fly. But there were some other really cool things that came with it. We didn’t have to wait for the cattle call to board the plane with the unwashed masses like we usually do. They repeatedly made announcements that we should download the airline’s entertainment app on our computer or tablet so we could access entertainment options during the flight, but for some reason it just wasn’t downloading on our I-Pad. I was getting uneasy as we neared departure because I wanted to make sure it would work. A flight attendant brought us some orange juice, and I told her I was having trouble with the entertainment app. She said, “Oh, don’t worry about that. We will give you both fully loaded tablets to use on the flight. We just make those announcements for the people back in coach.” We reveled in every little special blessing that comes with first class. As we were getting ready to exit the plane Laurie said, “I’ve noticed the other people in first class and I’m pretty sure we’ve enjoyed this way more than any of them.” For us, everything was a treat, a cause for gratitude, and that made it all more joyful. As we give thanks to God for everything good that he is, does and gives, we are going to enjoy it all a lot more and be a lot more joyful.

CONCLUSION

Do you want to do God’s will? Do you want to be related to him properly and have a right view of yourself? Do you want to be healthier and more joyful. Then take the magic pill of giving thanks always. Make it your habit of life to give thanks to God. Thank him as your response to everything in life. Start your day giving thanks to him. Thank him during your day as your response to everything. Thank him at the end of your day, and do this every day of your life. It’s all natural and government approved, and it’s better than thermogenesis.