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Rick Myatt

THE BATTLE OF THE VEGETABLES

Ephesians 5:18-20

Laurie and I get to spend a lot of time with our grandchildren, which is a source of tremendous joy and exhaustion. I have noticed one curious thing with all 3 of our grandkids who have graduated out of the nursing stage. At some point it becomes a battle to get them to eat. I’m not talking about eating healthy food. I’m talking about getting them to eat anything. All of them have hit periods where their parents would be happy if the kids would eat anything. Mickey waffles or Dino chicken, or whatever, just eat something. We went through this with our own kids when they were young. At one point I remember we talked to our pediatrician about it, desperate for help because we could only get them to eat peanut butter. He said, “Relax. When they’re hungry, they’ll eat.”

The challenge is amplified when we try to get them to eat vegetables. This has reminded me of an essay by humorist Rob Suggs. The piece was about his memories of his parents trying to get him to eat vegetables when he was a child. He wrote, “With the world of vegetables I had no quarrel; I’d examined them closely and concluded they were not for me…I’d made my lifestyle choice, and wished people to respect it.” He said at one point his mother pointed out that Popeye, his favorite cartoon character, ate spinach. He says he answered, “Popeye has a tattoo. If you’ll let me have a tattoo, I’ll eat the spinach.” She also tried the “millions of starving children would love to have your dinner” tactic, to which he replied, “I realize that and it fills me with sadness. I’m so upset about it I find I can’t eat for thinking about it.” Then there was the battle royal, the climactic battle of the war of the vegetables. Suggs wrote, “The vegetable in dispute was yams, the most aesthetically troubling dish I’d laid my eyes on in all my 5 years.” This conflict resulted in the “You’ll sit at the table until you eat it” consequence. Rob said that battle was his parents’ own personal Vietnam, an unwinnable conflict that could take years. The secret, he wrote, is that kids embrace martyrdom.

When something like that occurs, no one who participates in the combat is happy. There is no rejoicing for either parent or child. Something akin to that happens in our relationship with God. He has some spiritual vegetables that we need to eat and we want no part of them. Those vegetables sometimes come in the form of the hard things of life, and we resist them. To us they seem, as Suggs wrote, “the most aesthetically troubling dish” we’ve seen in all our years. We fight God and the result is the same as the battle of the vegetables. We end up unhappy and resisting the one who loves us. Today I want us to think about a different approach that has a radically different result. That approach is to give thanks.

GIVING THANKS IS CRUCIAL

Ephesians 5:18-20 says, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with Psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul instructed in verse 15 that we should be careful how we live, and that we should live wisely. To live wisely, according to verse 16, is to make the most of every opportunity, to wring all we can out of life. We should do that because the days are evil, meaning it is quite possible to waste our lives and have a futile, tragic existence. Paul is telling us not to make the mistake that Solomon saw in Ecclesiastes of turning life into a futile and tragic exercise.

Paul said we should not get drunk with wine, because that is the kind of thing humans typically do. It’s pretty hard to miss the fact that when you go in almost any supermarket you will see that a significant portion of the shelves are dedicated to alcohol. Why is that? Why is it that if you watch a sports event on TV you will be assailed by an avalanche of 3 kinds of commercials? There will be car commercials, ads for pharmaceuticals, because those are omnipresent on TV these days, and ads for various kinds of alcohol. Why is it there is a big problem with drug overdoses in our country?

People are trying to escape. They are trying to dull the stress, frustration and pain of life. They are trying to get away from kinds of issues that the writer of Ecclesiastes diagnosed. Paul warned against that approach. That route only makes the problem worse. It’s a bit like being stranded on a life raft at sea, running out of water and trying to deal with the thirst by drinking ocean water. It makes the problem much worse and will end up killing you.

That is definitely not making the most of the opportunity of life. It is wasting life, even destroying it. So Paul says we should take a completely different approach. We should be filled with the Spirit. What does that mean? There are lots of opinions, and you will hear some people telling you that you need some kind of miraculous event to be filled with the Spirit. But let’s think about what Paul meant by that expression. In Galatians 3:2-3 Paul said, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” The New Living Translation of verse 3 is better. It reads, “After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?”

For Paul, the Spirit was about the new covenant. Ezekiel said there would be a new covenant in which God would put his Spirit in us. One enters the new covenant by faith, by trusting that what God supplies in Jesus Christ is enough for us. So the Spirit is about trusting that what God does and gives is enough. To be filled with the Spirit is to live in the reality of that truth. It is to believe that though we don’t deserve it, by trusting what God has done through Jesus Christ we get his Holy Spirit in us. We have the Spirit of Jesus living in us. Being filled with the Spirit is continuing to live trusting what God gives is enough in all of life.

Paul then describes what that life will be like. We will be speaking to one another with songs and hymns, making music in praise to God. And we will always be giving thanks to God the Father in everything. Please notice two crucial words in that last statement. They are the words “always” and “everything.” No matter what happens we will give thanks to God.

I was talking to a neighbor recently about home maintenance and improvement projects. I related to him how a few years back we remodeled our kitchen. Not long after we did that our dishwasher died. When they pulled it out they discovered it had been leaking and we had water damage, which meant thousands of dollars of repair needed to be done. Yay. How was I supposed to respond to that? It was part of always and everything. That meant that I should give thanks to God when it happened.

Remember that living in the Spirit means believing that what God supplies is enough for me. Is this home maintenance disaster a part of always? Well, yes it is, since God works all things, let me repeat, all things, even this, according to the counsel of his will. Then at that moment I’m faced with the battle of the vegetables. Will I accept what God gives me and be thankful for it, or will I dig my heels in, pout, cry, and get angry at him for this plate of veggies? Am I going to make God say I have to stay at the table until I eat at least some of my veggies? Paul says if I’m filled with the Spirit I will say, “Lord, I don’t like this. I don’t want this. I’m frustrated by this and don’t understand why this is going on. But I trust you have allowed this for your purposes, and I believe what you give is what is good. So I accept this, and I thank you, even in this. I thank you that I can trust you and that you are always good, and somehow you will bring good out of this thing in some way.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says almost exactly what Ephesians 5:20 says, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” But then Paul adds, “For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” You want to do God’s will? Then give thanks. Give thanks always, in anything and everything. There is not a second of your life when it is not God’s will for you to give thanks to him. Scholar P. T. O’Brien said, “thanksgiving is almost a synonym for the Christian life.” That’s absolutely right. If we understand the gospel of grace, if we know that we absolutely deserve judgment from God with no mercy, but that what we are given is instead forgiveness, love and eternal life through Jesus Christ, then we should be thankful every day. We have been given a gift of immeasurable value, one utterly beyond our reach, and it is nothing but pure grace. The rational response to such a gift is to say thank you, and to do so without end.

It is not possible to truly understand the grace God has given us and not be deeply thankful for it. It is far bigger than anything else that will happen to us.

GIVING THANKS HAS MANY POSITIVE EFFECTS

**It honors God**

Our daughter, Carissa, is pregnant. Little Wesley is going to have a brother. Carissa and Michael tried for a long time to start a family. When it seemed they had exhausted every possibility and they were just not going to be able to have kids, almost miraculously, Carissa was pregnant! They and we had prayed so fervently for so long. Our response was to thank God, for there was no other explanation for that event than an answer to prayer. Recently they had been trying again to get pregnant because they wanted Wesley to have a sibling. Once again, it was not working. Carissa’s doctor determined that she had a low hormone level, so the plan was to begin giving her hormones in October in hopes that might help. Carissa found out in early September that she was pregnant! Once again, there was cause for much rejoicing and for giving thanks to God. When we thanked God for those children we were acknowledging that they are a true gift from him. We are saying we know that God truly is the source of life. We are proclaiming that God is good. These things bring honor to him. They glorify him.

This is a crucially important thing, because this is why we are here. Romans 11:36 says of God, “From him and through him and for him are all things.” Everything that exists is both from him and for him. It exists to honor him. So the verse ends saying, “To him be the glory forever! Amen.” That is a profound and radical truth. It says all of life is about honoring God. We exist to honor him!

We live with the persistent misconception that we are here for our own desires and purposes. We exist for ourselves. But the paradigm changing, life giving truth is, we exist for God. When we give thanks to him we are playing the role we were created to play. We are fulfilling the very purpose of our existence. When we do not give thanks we are failing to fulfill our purpose. That’s why life seems so futile and empty to people so often.

Toby and I have on a number of occasions agreed that one of the greatest jobs in the world has to be backup quarterback in the NFL. You get to be part of a team, you are playing football, you don’t have to deal with the stress of failing or getting injured, and you get paid really well. Salaries for backups average about $1.7 million per year. But I recently read a story about one backup qb who is typical. He is doing his best as the backup to be a good team guy, but he wants to play. He works hard to be prepared to step in and play if needed, but if he never gets to be the starter he won’t feel fulfilled. He won’t feel truly fulfilled because he never gets to play the role he believes he was designed for. There will always be a hole there. That’s true for us when we are not giving thanks to God. We are not playing the role we are designed for, and that leaves us with a hole inside.

**It orients us properly toward God**

Is failing to thank God all that bad? Yes, it is. It is, in fact, where problems start in the human heart. Beginning in Romans 1:18 Paul discussed “all the godlessness and wickedness” of people. He would explain all of the ugliness of the human race. In verse 21 he tells us where the problem started. “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.” That’s the departure point. When we do not glorify God and don’t give thanks to him we start barreling down the road of godlessness and wickedness. Our culture kind of laughs at the idea of wickedness. But let’s be clear, it is no joke. Every bit of pain you have ever experienced, the worst things humans do to each other, all come from wickedness and godlessness. It starts when we fail to give thanks to God.

Every moment that we are not in an attitude of giving thanks to God we are taking steps down the road to godlessness. We are saying we are independent of God and will do things our way, that whatever good we have is because we have created it or deserve it. The only way for us to be in right relation with God is to give thanks always.

I once spoke with a person who said she didn’t understand why God would make it so everyone had to praise and thank him. She said that seems self-centered, even narcissistic. Here’s the truth about that. God is true good and the source of all good. He is where life comes from, he is where love comes from, he is where joy comes from. When we don’t thank and praise him, we are saying something else is good. Something else is the source of love, life, joy and good. But if that something else is not, in fact, the true good, what is it? If it isn’t truly good, then it is evil. In other words, we make something evil the thing we honor, the thing we pursue thinking it can give us life, love and joy. Should we be surprised if the result is evil?

In the end, thanking God involves submitting to him. Like when on our little kitchen disaster happened, by thanking God I was accepting his will, when we thank God we are accepting what he gives us. We are eating our veggies. When we don’t thank him, like that petulant child resisting his or her parents, we are fighting against God.

**It is very good for us**

Philippians 4:6-7 is one of those familiar passages of Scripture that are full of promise. It says, “Do not be anxious about anything.” In other words, don’t worry about anything. Instead of worrying this passage instructs us to pray, to make our requests to God. Then it gives us that terrific promise. The promise isn’t God will always give whatever you want. It’s better. “The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus.” Isn’t that what we really want? What we all desire more than anything is to have peace.

How awesome to have peace that “transcends understanding.” To have peace that we can’t explain or even understand would be the best. These verses say God promises that to us. But there’s a problem, isn’t there? We’ve all had occasions when we’ve prayed about something, but not experienced peace. We keep stressing about it.

There is a problem with the way we often make our requests to God. Look at the wording of verse 6. Paul said, “In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” We skip over the phrase “with thanksgiving.” Remember what I said moments ago. Thanking God involves submitting to him. It means accepting whatever he decides to do with our requests. That’s where we get tripped up. We fail to make our requests with thanksgiving. Giving thanks means leaving it up to him to choose what to do with our requests and accepting what he decides. It is at that point that we begin to get peace. But if we don’t give thanks like that, we won’t have peace. That’s because we will be hanging on so tightly to what we’ve requested, sure that we will be devastated if we don’t get it.

Giving thanks also has a role in producing joy in our lives. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16 Paul commanded us to rejoice always, or to always be joyful. But that’s just not natural. Joy is a response to some good thing happening. It isn’t the normal response to the routine of life or to those times that are disappointing or difficult. So how are we to rejoice in those times? The following verses tell us. In verse 17 we pray without ceasing. Then in verse 18 Paul said we should give thanks always. That is how we orient our minds so we can experience joy. Giving thanks is a powerful way to experience joy. The more you give thanks to God, the more joy you will experience. If you want to be joyful, give thanks.

Researchers are now finding that giving thanks is enormous helpful for us. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* a few years ago summed up what researchers are finding about giving thanks. The article reported that people who give thanks, “have more energy, more optimism, more social connections and more happiness than others.” They are less likely to be depressed, they earn more money, sleep more soundly and have greater resistance to infections.” I’ve seen a number of articles about how to strengthen your immune system, and they usually focus on things like your diet and on sleeping more. They usually miss the biggest factors, which are giving thanks to God and having strong relationships. More and more research is showing that giving thanks is key to a healthy long life. It’s hardly surprising that giving thanks has such positive effects on our health and our lives, since it is key to being rightly related to God and having peace, joy and fulfillment.

In Psalm 69:30-31 David wrote, “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.” All the sacrifices, all the religious things people do, don’t please God nearly as much as glorifying him with thanksgiving.

APPLICATION

Author Christopher de Vinck says, “Gratitude is the exclamation point…of our lives…We are the only creatures on earth who can articulate a sense of appreciation with words of thanks.”

Ellie Wiesel, Nobel winning writer and professor, was born in Romania. In 1944 when he was 15 he and his entire family were sent to the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. The horrors he experienced there were unspeakable. His parents and one sister were murdered there. Such an experience could easily destroy a person or fill them with rage. For 10 years Wiesel refused to speak of what had happened to him. But he became a close friend of Francois Mauriac, the Nobel winning French writer who was a devout Christian. Mauriac encouraged him to use his experiences for good and to write about them. Wiesel’s attitude ultimately was remarkable. He said, “A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude. For me, every hour is grace. And I feel gratitude in my heart each time I can meet someone and look at his or her smile.”

Here are some practical things to do:

1. Abstain from comparing yourself to others. That is often a source of discontentment, envy and ingratitude. So be grateful for what you are and what you have. They are gifts from God.
2. Commit to a lifestyle of gratitude, of having a grateful heart that gives thanks to God in every situation.
3. Keep a gratitude journal, a record of all the things you are grateful to God for. Write them down.
4. Tell God one specific thing you are grateful for every day, and share that thing with another person.