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THE MAGIC PILL  
Ephesians 5:20

Suppose for a moment that I could offer you a pill that would have a dramatic effect on you if you took it. You would have to take this pill on a continuing basis, but if you took it consistently it would change you in powerful ways. The cool thing about this pill that I would offer you is that it has no side effects. It's not one of those things that has the possibility of causing, dizziness, heart palpitations, ringing in the ear or even death. It has no negative effects at all. It's not going to make you dopey or feel like you're walking around in a fog. You will be fully alert, fully alive to all of life.

But the positive effects of this pill are astounding. It will cause you to be more at peace with everything that happens in life, even when you suffer terrible losses. It will cause you to be content, no matter what your circumstances. It will make you a more joyful person with a much more positive outlook on life. In fact, other people will delight in being around you because you are so up and life affirming. In this series of sermons in which we are thinking about simplifying our lives this pill would help a lot. Would you want this pill? How much would you pay for such a pill? Most of us would be willing to pay large sums of money for a pill like that. Well, I've got news for you. There is such a pill and it won't cost you a dime. Only, it's not a pill. It's the practice of giving thanks to God. Ephesians 5:20 challenges us to give thanks on a continuing basis.

LIFE IN CHRIST ALWAYS MEANS GIVING THANKS

Ephesians 5:20 says, "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul has been telling his readers how to live in a time when "the days are evil" (verse 16). We should live wisely, make the most of our opportunities, not get drunk, but we should be filled with the Spirit. We should speak to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing in our hearts to the Lord. But as we are doing these things we should always be giving thanks.

We pause once a year for the Thanksgiving holiday. How appropriate it is that a nation should grind to a halt for a day to give thanks. But for those of us who believe in Jesus and follow him, while stopping specifically to give thanks is a good thing, it should be no different really than how we live every day of our lives. This verse tells we should *always* be giving thanks. That is to be the very manner

of every day of our lives, our reaction to everything that happens to us and around us. We are called to have a lifestyle of giving thanks.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." What does God want you to do? What kind of a person does he want you to be? He wants you to be a person who gives thanks all the time. Your response to every day and every event is to give thanks to God. Psalm 100:4 tells us to "Enter his (God's) gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; gave thanks to him and praise his name." Psalm 105:1 says, "Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done."

One scholar said quite simply that the Christian life is a life of continual thanksgiving. Another said, "For a Christian not to be thankful is abnormal." It is completely at odds with the new heart and new life that God has given us in Christ.

For us to give thanks two things are needed. First we need to perceive a benefit. Psalm 103: 2 says, "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." I will only give thanks when I believe that something good has been done to me or a good thing has been given to me. I've had a problem with our cell phone service provider. They made an incomprehensible mistake then charged me a couple of hundred dollars on my bill because of what they had done. I called them and explained the problem to their customer service representative whose name was Diane. When she saw what had happened she said, "Why did they do that? They shouldn't have done that." She was very apologetic and said she would take care of it. She said she would call back within a couple of days and verify that the problem had been corrected. She never called back. Two weeks passed and I decided I'd better call again. I told the new representative about my conversation with Diane and explained the whole problem again. She said, "Yes, I see the problem and it's still there. I'm very sorry that you had to call back. I will resolve it and call you back in two days." I didn't hear back from her either. A week later I got my bill and the charge was still there with a late fee added to it! I immediately called and went through the whole mess again and expressed my exasperation that this was the third time I'd had to call. I was more than a little frustrated that two of their people promised to solve the problem then did nothing. This time I was talking to a guy who kept telling me how sorry he was that this problem had not been taken care of. He told me three times that he would resolve it and that he would call me back the next day, or in two days at the most. I never heard from him again.

It seems that this company's customer service policy is to tell people whatever they want to hear and then do absolutely nothing, hoping that maybe the customer will

just give up and go away. I am not thankful to this company and its employees. I have not given thanks to them. For me to give thanks to them would require that they actually do something. I'd have to receive some sort of benefit from them. One of our greatest problems with giving thanks is that we fail to notice the many benefits we have been given. More on this shortly.

So we only give thanks when we perceive that we have received some benefit. But there's something else we need in order to give thanks and that's a benefactor. The Latin word *bene* meant "good." "Factor," the second part of the word, is from the Latin word that meant "to make." It is the root of factory. So a benefactor is one who makes the good we receive as a benefit. In order for us to give thanks we must perceive there is someone to thank for the benefit.

This week Laurie and I went to Stater Brothers supermarket. When we left we had food and other grocery items that we ate for several days. What a benefit! We went into that store and came away with food that will sustain us for days. Do you think I was especially grateful to that store? Not really. I didn't give thanks to them because they are not a benefactor. They don't *give* me anything. I paid for the groceries. Yes, there was a benefit to me, but it wasn't given to me by a benefactor so I have no reason to give thanks to them for the food that I am eating.

Thus the problem many have in our culture. They know they have received many benefits, but they deny that there is a Benefactor. So they end up being grateful to the universe or to the earth. Yeah, uh, I'm sure the universe really appreciates your gratitude. Not. That would be like me giving thanks to my chest of drawers for taking such good care of my clothes that I keep in it. I just know that my chest of drawers feels warm all over when I thank it for taking care of my jockey shorts. My chest of drawers and I have a wonderful relationship. So, to reiterate, we must perceive that we have received some benefit, and we must perceive that a benefactor has graciously given it to us.

#### WE FACE OBSTACLES TO GIVING THANKS

We struggle with the command of Ephesians 5:20 because it tells us to be thankful always for everything and a lot of things happen to us that we are not thankful for. I got a cold this week and felt crummy. One night I couldn't sleep because I couldn't stop coughing. Awake at three in the morning, feeling lousy and coughing continually I most definitely did not think, "Wow, I am really thankful for this cold." Nevertheless, even in that kind of situation I had reason to be thankful. Every moment of our lives we are receiving benefits. But often we don't perceive them because of how we think.

One problem has to do with our *expectations*. I go through life thinking that it is normal and expected that life will go the way I want. I will get the job I want and keep it. I will have a happy marriage and my spouse won't leave me. No one will steal my identity and create a world of havoc for me. I won't become gravely ill. I will travel on the freeway at more than 70 miles per hour surrounded by thousands of other cars doing the same and driven by people of questionable soundness of mind without any of them banging into me. I won't get e. coli from the food I eat. My child will be born healthy and with no genetic defects. The plane I fly on will not crash. No devastating earthquake will destroy my home. I won't get hepatitis from eating at a restaurant. No one will burglarize my house or steal my car.

That's what we expect! In other words, we have a sense of entitlement. This is the life that I am entitled to! A sense of being entitled destroys gratitude. Entitled people aren't thankful. They think they've just received what they deserved, what is their right to have. When those bumps show up in the road, whether they be minor annoyances or great tragedies or something in between, we react as though we've been mistreated. We haven't gotten what we ought to rightfully expect. I've been cheated! I'm supposed to be grateful when this happens?

We need to examine that perspective. What do you have a right to expect? There are two biblical ideas that should give us an entirely different view of life in this world. The first is that we live in a fallen world where there is disease, natural disasters and fallen, sinful people who care only for themselves. Romans 8 tells us creation is groaning because it is broken. In light of that it is certain that we are going to suffer losses, hurts, disappointments and tragedies. Is that true of everyone but you? You're the one person who should expect that none of that will ever happen to you? If you walk outside when it is raining you are going to get raindrops on you. If you live in a fallen world you should expect that you will experience some of the painful aspects of living in such a broken place.

A second important idea is that we are fallen people. What we deserve, what we ought to rightfully expect, is death and judgment! In Genesis 2 God told Adam the day he disobeyed the one command he had been given he would die. The principle is stated in Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death." The day we sin, the day we do anything God does not want us to do, we should die. Any moment we live beyond that day is nothing but God's grace and goodness to us. So today if you are not receiving death or judgment, you are receiving a benefit that you do not deserve! You are alive today! That is a gift that you do not deserve. This seriously changes our expectations. We should expect nothing, and in light of that we should see everything good that happens as a benefit for which we should give thanks.

A second problem for us is *discontentment*. We want more. In his book *Authentic Faith*, Gary Thomas pointed out that since the fall the human brain seems hardwired to want more, to be discontent. The example for us here is Adam and Eve. They lived in Eden, a true utopian dream. They lived in close connection to God and to each other. They lived in a perfect climate in a place where they didn't have to break their backs to provide sustenance for themselves. They didn't have to fear running out of money or food. They didn't have to stress about retirement or being financially secure. They didn't fear encountering a deadly animal or some natural disaster and they were surrounded by awe-inspiring beauty. They lived in perfect peace.

What would have been the reasonable and appropriate response? Gratitude! It would have been to thank God for each other, for life, for food, for loving them, for the beauty of the sky, the flowers, the trees, the birds, the animals, the clouds, the water, the food they ate. It would have been to thank God for peace and security. But what did they do? The tempter came along and said, "You can have more!" Instead of being thankful for what God had given them, they wanted more. Well, they got it. And we've been tragically sorry ever since.

That is part of the curse of the human race. We have that dissatisfaction inside us. The grass is always greener. What I have is good, but I want something a little better. It is simply not possible to be dissatisfied with what I have and truly thankful for it at the same time. Our discontentment wipes out true gratitude.

The last obstacle to thanksgiving is *misplaced values*. It is natural that we focus on things of this world. We want to not hurt. We want to feel good. We want to be happy. So we tend to value the things that we think will bring us those things. Good circumstances, good health, plenty of money, lots of people who love us, no disasters.

We get tied up in knots when life seems to turn against us, when we have those setbacks of various kinds. But here's the truth: at the end of the day, no matter what happens in Christ you have a secure eternal future. The best that this life has to offer will pale in comparison to what awaits you, and it will never end! The unpleasant reality of this world is that it is all temporary and fleeting. I just read a collection of short stories by Alistair McLean, maybe my favorite all time fiction writer. He died in 1987. I remember hearing that he had died and being sad, knowing he would write no more novels. But I also remember thinking at the time that he had lived a long and fruitful life, that he was awfully old and probably

would not have been able to write much more anyway. In reading this collection of his short stories I received a rude shock. I found out he was a mere 2 years older than I am right now at the time of his death. I am increasingly aware that life just doesn't stay the same, ever. It changes and it flies by quickly. We wish we could make it stop, but we can't. But what we have to look forward to is a time when the constant losing of good things, the constant changing, will end. We will have good more fully than we have ever experienced, and it won't go away. It will be permanent and it will be eternal. We have reason to give thanks.

God loves you. He loves you so much he went to the cross for you. He has forgiven you. He has given you the promise of eternal life. He has given you a whole new life in Christ. He has put his Spirit in you. He has given you an eternally important purpose for living. He is always with you. He is working some good for you in everything that happens. He is working to make you strong right this minute. He has given you his truth. He has given you brothers and sisters in Christ. No matter what happens today, no matter how hard or disappointing it might be, what God has given you is way more valuable. It is worth far more than whatever that thing you didn't get is worth.

Our biggest problem is our values are distorted. We're like little girl whose parents have just given her a \$2000 diamond bracelet, but she's unhappy because what she wants is some plastic Barbie jewelry that her friend got. It's like what every parent has experienced. You've given your little toddler some ridiculously expensive toy and what they want to play with is the box it came in. If you take the box away they throw a tantrum.

Gratitude, giving thanks, doesn't come from getting more stuff. It comes from greater awareness of God's presence and goodness. Chen Min Lin became a follower of Jesus at the age of 19 in China. He would become the leader of 3 house churches and because of his ministry in the name of Jesus, he was arrested. While he was in prison both his wife and his son died. He watched many brothers in Christ die in that prison. At one point he was given a new job in the prison. It was to clean out the cesspool every day. This was typically a virtual death sentence, for those who had that job invariably contracted infection and died. His first day at that job the stench was overwhelming. But he quickly learned that the smell clung to him with the result that the prison guards left him alone because they didn't want to be around him. He began to sing. He began to thank God. He was unfairly imprisoned for 18 years. He was mistreated and abused. He'd lost his wife and child. He lost many friends. He had the worst job in the world. And he gave thanks

to God. Despite all that had happened to him he gave thanks for the good that God gave to him in Jesus.

### GIVING THANKS IS REVOLUTIONARY

It revolutionizes our relationship to God. In fact, it puts us in proper relation to him. When we give thanks we acknowledge that in his goodness he has given us that which we did not deserve. When we do not give thanks to God we claim that we do deserve something, that we owe nothing to him. That's why Romans 1:21 says the crucial error in the human race is "although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." When we do not give thanks to God we start down that road.

Giving thanks says three important things. First it says that God is good and so we can trust him. It is an expression of trust. Second it speaks of our dependence. When we give thanks to God we acknowledge that what we have comes from him. Third, giving thanks is a commitment of submission. It says I accept what God has given me, whatever it might be.

The alternative to giving thanks ultimately is to complain. When we refuse to give thanks we are questioning God, grumbling and unhappy about what he has allowed in our lives. How does God feel about that? 1 Corinthians 10:10 speaks of the ancient people of Israel who, when they ran out of water in the wilderness, complained, then says, "do not grumble as some of them did and were killed by the destroying angel." Either give thanks and express submission to God, or grumble and expect to get the consequences!

Giving thanks also revolutionizes our lives. Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

What a great promise. Pray about everything and God will give you peace. But there's a problem. I've prayed about things before and not been at peace. Usually that's because I left out part of the verse. I left out "with thanksgiving." When I give thanks to God I remember all the good that I have. I remember that God can be trusted because he's my loving Father.

When Anna's car was broken into a couple of weeks ago I thought back to a time when an apartment I lived in was burglarized. I and my roommates had been at a ministry event. When we came home we found someone had broken in and stolen everything we had of value. We called the police. Several friends in the apartment complex joined us and we all thanked God. We didn't understand why he'd allowed us to be robbed, but we thanked him. We didn't thank him for the burglary. But we thanked him that he loves us, that the stuff was just temporal stuff that didn't really matter, that he would provide what we need, that he was with us. By the time the police arrived we were rejoicing and confident in our God and having so much fun that the officer thought we were nuts. Giving thanks freed us to be at peace and to be joyful even in the midst of a trial.

Giving thanks is about not being desperate to have more but being thankful for what you already have. As such it is key to being content. While we are on vacation Laurie read a book that Laurie O'Brien gave her titled *A Thousand Gifts*. In it the author, Ann Voskamp, said that her life had been totally changed by committing to continually give thanks to God for the myriad blessings in her life. She said that developing a life of giving thanks for the life she had enabled her to find the life she had always wanted.

## APPLICATION

### MAKE A LIST

Take time this season of Thanksgiving to sit down and write out what you are thankful for. I would suggest you begin with what God has done for you. Then include the people in your life. Don't forget the things you might take for granted. I'm glad for blue skies, eyes to see it, music and ears to hear it, colorful flowers, central heating on cold nights, a fire in the fireplace, the fact that the Chargers being a disappointment costs me nothing.

### SHARE THE THANKS

Tell people about how thankful you are. Tell others how thankful you are, for in so doing you will help them also give thanks.

### MAKE IT A HABIT

Make it your habit to live by giving thanks, all the time for everything in every situation. Make it your initial response to every event. You will find you will become a more joyful, peaceful person who honors God.