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THE MIRACLE PILL
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

I have never watched Dr. Oz on television. At this point I doubt I ever will. He keeps making pitches for amazing diet pills that are *THE ANSWER* for losing weight. He has now pushed Green Coffee Bean Extract, Raspberry Ketones, African Mango, Saffron Extract and Garcinia Cambogia. Don't you wonder how they can all be the answer? Don't you also find you are a bit suspicious of all of them? Especially since there is yet to be any true rigorous scientific evidence that any of them are actually worth a hill of beans, green coffee or otherwise.

Dr. Oz has also promoted another pill for a different purpose. This supplement pill is called Carnosine. He claims it is a miracle anti-aging pill. It will supposedly give you more energy, reduce wrinkles and give smoother, more supple skin. I hate to be cynical, but I suspect all it will really produce is a healthier bank account for Dr. Oz. I hope I'm wrong, but I doubt I am.

So today I want to offer you a miracle pill. This pill absolutely will cause you to be healthier and happier. It might even make you able to make more money. For sure it will lead to more joy and more peace in your life, and who doesn't want that? However, this miracle pill isn't actually a physical pill at all. It is something you can do. Anyone can do it, and the more you do it, I guarantee the happier, more peaceful, healthier and stronger you will be. As a disclaimer I want you to know that I get no financial benefit from promoting this "pill." You will see this pill mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

ALWAYS BE JOYFUL

Paul was giving his closing instruction to the church in Thessalonica, and the first of a sort of staccato series of commands was to "rejoice always." The New Living Translation renders that "always be joyful." That is a command that we'd all like to obey. Everyone wants to be joyful. We all want to rejoice. The great mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said that the motive in everything every single human being does is to be happy. In other words, we want nothing as much as we want to rejoice, to have joy, and to have it all the time if possible.

Joy is magnetic. It is life giving. We love to be around it and we want to have it. If somehow I could offer you a choice, either a life full of joy or a life of discouragement and sadness, completely lacking joy, which would you choose?

We all want joy. And we love being around joyful people because they lift our spirits and give us life;. I know this from personal experience. Our friend, Michael Fuelling, who is a pastor in the Chicago area, was visiting us and telling us about his 3 kids. He told us what he believes to be the main character trait of each one of them. Of one of his daughters he said, “She’s like Laurie. She brings joy to every situation and to other people.”

That is one of the things that I have always loved about Laurie from the first time I met her until this day. She is full of joy and brings it to other people. The first day of our vacation back in September we woke up utterly spent after an arduous, long day traveling the day before. Fortunately the deal we had at the hotel where we were staying included a breakfast buffet. We managed to transport ourselves to the buffet and pile lots of food on our plates. We sat at a table that was outside on an absolutely magnificent day as we looked out over a ridiculously beautiful scene. We ate a very leisurely breakfast. They had some nice background music playing, and around the end of the meal both of us about the same time noticed that the song that was playing was very familiar to us, but we couldn’t recall what it was. We sat there trying to figure it out. We knew the tune, but just couldn’t place it. Finally one very familiar part of the song gave me the clue. I had it! I told Laurie, “I know what it is. It’s an old song called *Fascination*.” She said, “I know I’ve heard it before, but how did you recognize it.” So I told her. When Jerry and I were kids we somehow got hold of a record by a couple of the most hick guys on the planet who went by the name Homer and Jethro. They had a musical comedy act in which they essentially mangled songs and changed the words of them. One part of their schtick involved the song, *Fascination*. They sang a line that went, “She had 9 buttons on her nightgown, but she could only fasten 8.” This was the epitome of deeply dumb, but Laurie burst into laughter. And she kept on laughing. She laughed so hard that tears were coming out of her eyes and she was gasping for breath. Do you know what happens when you are around someone laughing that hard? I started laughing too. Pretty soon we were both laughing so hard we couldn’t breathe. What a great way to begin a vacation. That kind of thing happens all the time with Laurie. It makes life fun.

God wants us to be joyful. Philippians 4:4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say it, rejoice.” The late Dallas Willard, a great philosopher and truly godly man, said that God is the most joyous being in existence. God wants us to be like him, meaning he wants us to also be joyful. Jesus explained why he gave his disciples the profound instruction that last night in the Upper Room in John 15:11. “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

Do you think of Jesus as joyful? We sing that he was a “man of sorrows,” and surely he knew sorrow. But in that verse Jesus was giving his men motivation for grasping and obeying his teaching. That motive was that if they listened and obeyed his joy would be in them. They could be as joyful as him!

Suppose President Trump told you that if you would accept his instruction you could become humble like him. Would that seem like a good idea to you? I don't think so. It would make sense to learn humility from someone who is actually humble, don't you think? At least in his public persona that isn't probably the first way you would describe him. If Jesus was gloomy, continually sorrowful, ever pessimistic and as serious as a crutch, do you think the disciples would have said, “Hey we can be as joyful as you? Where do we sign up for that?” I don't think so. This comment of his worked as motivation because his men said, “I would love to be as joyful as Jesus. That would be totally cool.” In fact, Jesus said if they had his joy in them they would be joyful to the max. Their joy would be complete. It would be perfect, it would be so total that it couldn't get any more joyful.

That is what Jesus wants for his followers. It is why he commands us to rejoice always. He wants his people to be characterized by the kind of joy he had, and at every moment of their life to be rejoicing. But this isn't all that easy, is it? To rejoice, we have to have something to rejoice about. We rejoice because something good has happened. So how are we supposed to rejoice, to be full of joy, when bad stuff is happening?

Our son, Toby, went to San Francisco this week to interview at UCSF for their residency program. His first night they had a dinner for prospective residents. After the dinner he went to where he had parked his rental car and found it was gone. It had been towed. The natural human response to that and paying the \$400 fee to get the car back is not to rejoice.

How are you supposed to rejoice when you hate your job, when you get cut from the team, when you get fired from a job you want, when you get a dreaded diagnosis, when your kids are making awful choices, when your marriage is far from what it ought to be? How are we supposed to rejoice always when our circumstances give us little or nothing to be joyful about? We are going to have to be joyful about something independent of our circumstances. It is going to have to be about things that transcend circumstances, such as that we know God, that he loves us, that we have hope, and that he gives us great blessings that are there despite our circumstances.

TRY GIVING THANKS

Paul understood that circumstances were not always joyful. They certainly weren't for the Thessalonians. In 1:6 Paul said they first accepted the good news of Christ "in the midst of severe suffering." Not just suffering, but severe suffering. The natural response to suffering is not joy. Understanding this Paul went on to give them a couple of commands that would enable them to rejoice despite their difficult situation. The first was to pray without ceasing. This is exactly what we saw last week when James asked if any of his readers were in trouble, and told them the best response to difficulty was to pray.

Then Paul said another important factor in being joyful, especially during hard times, is to give thanks to God in everything. In fact, Paul said it is God's will for us to give thanks to God. We all want to know what God's will is. Well here it is. Give thanks. Toby and Anna are coming to a crucial point in their lives where they have to request where they would like to spend the next 3 or 4 years. What should they do? They will ask God to direct them, no doubt. But here's the thing. The one thing they know they should do is give thanks, no matter what happens. That's the one thing they should be doing right now.

Psalm 136 commands us to give thanks to God 4 times. Psalm 119:61-62 says, "Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law. At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws." Those verses tell us a lot. First the Psalmist envisioned a terrible circumstance. Wicked people clearly were opposing him, and in this case he imagined them tying him up. That would be a frightening and unpleasant circumstance, to say the least. The Psalmist said even in that situation he would give thanks to the Lord.

The problem with giving thanks in everything is the same with being joyful always. Sometimes we are not thankful for what's happening to us. In fact, we'd give anything to not have it happen. So how are we supposed to give thanks. Notice what he said he would give thanks for. He would give thanks to God for his laws, for his truth that both sets us free and gives us guidance and direction in life. It gives us comfort and hope. He wasn't going to say, "Hey, thanks for these awful people tying me up, Lord." Yet even in that situation he would give thanks.

Then notice when he would do it. He would get up at midnight to give thanks to God! This is more important than sleep. Maybe you've seen those commercials where people make dumb mistakes, then the voiceover says, "Never underestimate the power of a good night's sleep." This Psalm says, "never underestimate the power of giving thanks to God."

Psalm 100:4 says, “Enter his (God’s) gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.” As we come into his presence we should do so with thanksgiving.

Why is giving thanks to God such a big deal? Why is it his will for us in every situation? Why is it so important that it is a priority even over sleep? There is both a vertical and a horizontal component to the answer to those questions.

Being rightly related to God starts with giving thanks. I’ve said this frequently, but we easily forget it. Romans 1 beginning in verse 18 explains the origin and the depth of the human condition. Paul tells us that even in creation God has revealed some truth about himself. People can see that God exists, that he is creative, wise and powerful. You have to absolutely close your eyes to miss that message. Then in verse 21 he said, “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 bad things start happening. Our thinking becomes futile. Inevitably we will start making dumb, self-defeating decisions. We will pursue illusions and end up with emptiness and bitterness. The key point here is that being rightly related to God starts with giving thanks to him, and when we fail to do that our thinking and our lives start getting distorted. It’s not too hard to understand how that works. Years ago a couple shared with me their frustration over their teen age daughter. She had been generally incorrigible to them, but the precipitating incident in this case was that they were going to take a family vacation in Hawaii. The teenager was making life miserable for them because she didn’t want to go. She couldn’t envision being away from her friends for 10 days. She would be sentenced to 10 awful days with her family and not with her friends. Had her friends given her life? Had her friends sacrificed to provide for her? Were her friends going to some day pay for her college education? Would her friends pay for her driver training so she could obtain a driver’s license?

That young girl failed to have gratitude toward her parents and to let giving thanks to them rule in her life, and her thinking became futile and her foolish heart was darkened. You and I both know that those all-important friends would likely fade out of her life altogether when she got out of high school. And I’m sorry, but to make a fuss because your parents want to take you to Hawaii? That’s just idiotic.

When we do not give thanks to God, we play the role of that bratty teenager. We grieve God, to be sure, but mostly we become the center of the universe in our minds, we distance ourselves from him and resent his intrusion into our lives, and we start making foolish, futile choices. Our hearts grow dark. The interesting effect of that is we become miserable and make people around us miserable too. We do not get more joyful!

The Greek word translated “give thanks” is eucharisteo. You might recognize the root of it, since it is the middle part of the verb. It is the word charis, which means grace. It is a reminder that when we thank someone it is an acknowledgment that they have done something kind for us that was not due us. Our son in law, Michael, now works as a pilot flying for Delta Airlines. When he sees that his pay has been deposited in his bank account he doesn’t call the CFO of the corporation and say, “Thank you so much for your kindness and generosity.” He worked and earned that money. They owed it to him. This is not a function of kindness but obligation, so no thanks required.

Several years ago Laurie and I were at a restaurant here in the area and we saw a couple we knew. They were just about finished with their meal, but we chatted with them for a few minutes before we were seated. It was fun to see them. We sat down at our table and a few minutes later they dropped by as they were leaving, after finishing their meal. We told them we enjoyed seeing them. We ate our meal then told our server we would like our bill. She told us that our bill had been paid. Our friends had paid for our meal! That was pure grace. We had not earned it. We did not deserve it. It was nothing but kindness. That’s the kind of kindness and grace God has shown us, and the reasonable response is to give thanks and to do it continually, for every day he continues to pour out his grace on us.

Gratitude for God’s grace is what our relationship with God is all about. **Being connected to God and experiencing his grace is essential to joy. We will never be joyful without that. And giving thanks is key to being connected to God and his grace.**

Giving thanks is also fundamental to health. Interestingly, not only is giving thanks crucial to our relationship with God, but it is essential to our own spiritual and mental health. That begins with the fact that until we are rightly related to God and connected to him, nothing will ever be quite right in life. We will always know that something is wrong, something is missing. Plus, as we saw, we will become futile in our thinking.

One of most everyone's favorite promises in the Bible is in Philippians 4:6-7. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, 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." Pray about everything, and God's peace will guard your heart and mind. Sounds terrific. But we typically fail to notice the phrase "with thanksgiving." Make your request with thanksgiving. Giving thanks means implies we are submitting to God's will in the matter. We are acknowledging we are owed nothing. It is a step of faith, trusting in what God decides to do. It is that act of giving thanks that is essential to experiencing the peace of God.

So peace and contentment are found in giving thanks. We've already seen that joy is dependent on giving thanks. You can see that linkage again in Psalm 9:1-2. "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." Do you want to be glad and rejoice in God? Then practice giving thanks!

An article in *Forbes* magazine reports that a lifestyle of giving thanks leads to people having fewer aches and pains and just generally feeling healthier, increases over all happiness and reduces depression, helps people sleep better, have greater empathy for others and increases mental strength. Studies show it plays a big role in our ability to overcome trauma.

The Harvard Mental Health letter reports that studies reveal consistent link between gratitude and well being. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* by Melinda Beck reported that people who have a consistent habit of expressing gratitude have more energy, are more optimistic, have more social connections, are happier, earn more money and have greater resistance to disease. So if you want more money and want to be healthy, give thanks. It's the key to health and wealth!

Giving thanks shifts our hearts from the things we don't like, from our discontentment in life, to the immeasurable good we are continually receiving from God, and the more we focus on that the more joy we will have.

APPLICATION

The obvious application of this truth is that we should all become habitual thankers. We should be characterized by continually giving thanks to God, no matter what the situation. So what should we do? I will suggest several things.

Give thanks this Thanksgiving. Make sure your celebration of Thanksgiving includes giving thanks to God. In fact, make sure it is the focus of your celebration.

Respond to everything by thanking God. Practice giving thanks to God as your way of responding to everything that happens, whether good or bad. We have watched Anna and Toby go through some stressful times this year. There is the background continuing stress of Toby getting through medical school. But then came Anna's second pregnancy. It was less painful and difficult than her first pregnancy, right up to the day we got a call from Anna telling us she was in the hospital because there were big problems. The doctors raised questions about whether the baby would survive, and if she did if she might have serious problems. We were all deeply concerned and most assuredly not happy about the situation. Anna was told she had to be on bed rest, that she could not go to work, and had to not stress herself at all. It was a difficult situation.

To our great joy and for me a little bit of amusement, not only did Anna take that pregnancy to full term, little baby Cara was born exactly on her due date. Then came the real irony of God's wise plan. Anna had deeply wanted to stay home with her children and it caused her great distress to go to work and leave Ella. As a result of her difficult pregnancy, the one we didn't think we were thankful for, she had to stay home and work from there. She did such an outstanding job a couple of months ago her boss told her, "this has worked so well that you can stay at home and work from there permanently." The thing we didn't think we were thankful for was the thing God used to give her what she wanted most. When she told us this I was so happy. Then she said, "I am so thankful to God for how he has worked this out in an incredible way." And I thought, "Oh, yeah, I ought to thank God for this." Weird how sometimes we can sort of forget about that. But what a joyful prayer it was to thank God for an amazing example of his wisdom and goodness.

Start every day by giving thanks to God to set the tone for the day. First thing in the morning give thanks. This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Let's give thanks for it. Let's give thanks for lots of things as we start our day.

Choose during the day at least once to share your thanks with someone. Tell them how thankful you are to God for his grace and his blessings.

End your day by giving thanks to God. Let that be one of the last things in your mind as you go to sleep.

