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LIKE A TWO THUMBS UP REVIEW Hebrews 13:15

On a recent vacation Laurie and I did something none of our kids have ever dared to do. Understand that they are a pretty adventurous bunch. They have all surfed and done stand-up paddle boarding. Some have gone snorkeling with sharks and sting rays. They have gone sky-diving and white water rafting. They have gone rock climbing, zip-lining and one has flown supersonic fighter jets. But none of them have had the courage to do what we did.

For several days on our trip we were staying in an area where there were nothing but high priced restaurants. There used to be a moderately priced one, but it has gone out of business. We were looking for some source for reasonably priced food, but there was only one. It was a dubious establishment called “Da Crack.” My guess is that the name originated with the fact that its public face is literally a hole in a wall. One window, and that’s it. It is a bit disreputable looking to begin with. However, they have exacerbated their doubt inducing appearance with the sign they put over the window. It depicts a Mexican fellow playing a guitar while seated and facing away from you. His pants don’t...um...cover the subject, if you get my drift. As in he has the classic plumber problem, thus depicting the name of the establishment. Now doesn’t that make you want to eat there? They might as well have called it the E Coli Café, famed for its salmonella salad. I’ve had friends who have gotten riotously sick on vacations from eating something they shouldn’t have. Thus all of our kids have steered clear of Da Crack because they had the distinct desire to avoid just such an occurrence.

Laurie and I did it. Boldly going where no Myatt or Townsend had dared go before, we got our dinner one night at Da Crack, took it down to the beach and had a marvelous meal eating while watching the sun set. And it was really good. Even better, we had no unfortunate gastronomical events as a result. We didn’t do that because we are hair on fire, live on the edge, devil may care adrenaline junkies who get our kicks out of tempting fate. Far from it. The reason we took that bold step is that we read a number of reviews of the place and they were uniformly very positive. Having our confidence buoyed by those positive reviews we took the leap. I’d go back in a heartbeat. Today I want to talk about another sort of review, one that I’m going to challenge you to give. It is the most important review you can ever give. We will see the challenge in Hebrews 13:15

THE PRINCIPLE: PRAISE IS A PRESENT ON GOD'S CHRISTMAS LIST

Giving a gift is always a sacrifice. It requires giving something of mine to someone else. If I buy a present to give to someone I have to use money that I have earned to buy that gift. In Hebrews 13:15 we are told, "through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise." The sacrifice that God has requested, one of the things on his Christmas list, is praise.

If you have been a follower of Jesus for any time at all this will not be a surprise to you. You see it frequently in the Bible. Psalm 92:1 says, "it is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High." Psalm 100:4 says, "enter his (God's) gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise." If you came to my house I would have some expectations of you. For instance, I would expect that you would not just open the door, walk in, flop down on the couch, grab the television remote, my television remote, and change the channel from the football game that I was watching to some nature show that you're interested in. I have nothing against nature shows, it's just that I would expect that you would ask if you wished to watch another television show. That is what I would desire of you.

So when we come into God's house, when we enter his gates, meaning we come into his presence, what does he expect of us? That verse from Psalm 100 tells us he requests that we praise him. Ephesians 1 tells us about the many spiritual blessings that God has given to us. But have you ever noticed why he has given those blessings? Verse 12 tells us that it is that we might be for the praise of his glory. You'll see the same message in verse 6 and verse 14. Paul said God has worked in our lives so that we might be to the praise of his glory. In other words, he really wants us to praise him.

In 1 Peter 2:9 we get that same message once again. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Listen to what those words say about those of us who are believers in Jesus. It says we are a chosen people. That's really amazing. One of the most memorable and definitely one of the best days of my entire life was August 24, 1979. On that day at the First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton, California, before several hundred people a pastor asked me if I took this beautiful young woman named Laurie Bingham to be my wife. It was not a difficult question answer. I simply said, "I do," the expected words, but what I really wanted to say was "Do I ever!" I wanted to take her as my wife more than anything else in life. What happened next was astounding and was even better. The pastor turned to Laurie and asked her if she took me to be her

husband. To my great relief, she didn't even hesitate. She didn't say, "Wow, uh, give me a minute here. I need to think about this." She simply said "I do."

That day she chose me to be her husband. What a great feeling that was and still is. This may reveal something about my long-standing insecurities, but honestly all my life I felt like I was a little bit on the outside. I felt like people didn't hate me but I wasn't their first choice of someone to be with either. Have you ever felt like that? I have always had friends, but it felt to me like I was never anyone's BFF. But on that glorious day Laurie said that I was her BFF. She chose me. She said she would rather be with me than with anyone else on the planet. I have been inexpressibly grateful to her every day of my life since. It felt better than I can ever explain to be chosen. Being chosen is something that every human being longs for.

In that verse the apostle Peter tells us we are chosen people. He says we belong to God. We belong! We are like his BFFs. We are not nobodies in this world. That verse in Peter's letter says we are somebody special. We belong to God. We are his chosen people and that is an infinitely precious privilege. We will never be nobodies again. But in choosing us God had something in mind that he wanted us to do. And what he wants us to do is to declare his praise.

The Greek word translated "declare" is *exangello*. Its root is the same root we get our word angel from. It means to announce something or to tell it out. But there is a preposition tacked onto the front of the root, the little word *ex*. That preposition means out from so altogether the word means to tell it out to proclaim it.

The point here is that this is a very verbal action. To declare the praises of God you actually have to say something. Until you have spoken you may be thinking very nice things about God, you may have a great regard for him, even reverence, but you have not praised him. You only praise him when you actually express that reverence and regard for God out loud. You praise him when you tell someone how great God is, and not until then.

When I was in graduate school I worked for a while at a grocery store making just above minimum wage. My pay was low because I was at the lowest position that you could have in the store. I hoped to get a promotion to a position in which I could make more money since I was trying to support myself and put myself through school. I worked really hard at that job and hustled as much as I could. But after I had been there for some time another company offered me another job that supposedly would pay me a bit more money. This other job also had greater flexibility in its schedule so I could tailor my hours around my school

commitments more easily. After some deliberation I decided that I should quit and take this other job. I went into the manager over me and explained to him that because of the greater flexibility and especially because of the greater pay I was going to quit and take another job. He reacted with great surprise. He said that I was one of their best employees and in just a few weeks they planned to promote me. While that was good news, it was too late. I had already told the other employers that I would take their job. The problem there was the management of that store thought highly of me, highly enough to promote me even. But they never told me. They never declared my praise. It's good to think highly of God. But to praise him we must actually express that admiration for him.

Back in Hebrews 13:15 notice that the author says "let us continually offer to God." God wants us to offer praise to him continually! Does that mean I'm supposed to be praising God at every moment of my life? That everything I'm supposed to say is praise to God? No, it just means that there is never a time in your life you were to stop praising God. What if I get really sick? Laurie and I were recently talking about the first two Thanksgivings we shared. I was miserably sick for both of them. It was no fun at all. In that situation was I supposed to praise God? To continually offer God the sacrifice of praise means that yes even in those situations I was to praise God. I wasn't to praise him because he had given me some great thing, because clearly being sick is no great thing. But I was to praise him as an act of faith and submission, acknowledging his goodness even when it wasn't obvious in my circumstances.

We should note that the writer of Hebrews calls it a sacrifice of praise. That means that sometimes it won't be easy, like when you're sick at the campsite on Thanksgiving. It is a sacrifice to choose to praise God in a situation like that. That is what God has called us to do. It is a sacrifice, which means it is a deliberate act.

QUESTION: WHY DOES GOD WANT PRAISE?

Suppose that Laurie asked me what I want for Christmas this year and I told her I want her to praise me continually. Imagine that I told her I want her to praise me every single day and to tell me of my great glory. What would you think of that? I'm pretty sure you would think, "ewww, that's gross." You would think "that dude must have an ego that's larger than Donald Trump's." You might well think I've got to be one of the most insecure people in the world. So if it would seem to you that I am egotistical and insecure if I want my wife to continually praise me then doesn't that mean that God must also be egotistical and insecure?

How are we to understand a God who wants continual praise? Why does God command that we praise him? ***Because failure to praise always leads to evil.*** God knows that we have difficulty staying focused. The problem is that if we do not stay focused on praising God we will wander off from him and start worshiping something else. Romans 1:21-23 says, “Although they knew God they neither honored him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and animals and birds and reptiles.”

Paul saw that people always worshiped something. When they didn't worship and praise God they did dumb things. They started praising idols and all manner of false gods. Today there are many people still worshiping false gods, even animals. But the key is that if we don't worship God we will worship something in creation. In our culture it won't necessarily be idols, but it will be some created thing. It might be money, or pleasure, or fame, or position, or power. If you drill down on all those things what you will find is they are really about self. So if you don't continually praise God you will end up worshiping yourself and will experience all the horrific consequences of that.

God is ultimate pure good. When you praise him you are acknowledging that he is in fact the ultimate good. If you choose not to continually praise him you will drift off of him and start thinking that something else is ultimate good. To choose that which is not ultimate good and call it ultimate good inevitably ends up evil.

Last year I had a little foray into music and learned to sort of play the electric bass. I played in church a number of times. On those occasions I figured out that for me and my very limited abilities the ultimate good was to play the proper notes. I'm not a good enough musician to actually play it like a musical instrument. The best I could do is the musical equivalent of paint by the numbers. The ultimate good for me was to not make any mistakes by playing wrong notes. Suppose I decided one day to not focus on the ultimate good. Imagine that I chose that the ultimate good would be for me to not be stressed by being concerned with playing the right notes, but to instead be relaxed about playing whatever note seemed best to me. Play whatever will make me happy. After all, it is narrow-minded to say one must play a certain note. Who are you to say that the note I chose to play is wrong? So the good is just being relaxed and making myself happy. What would the outcome be? It would be musical evil. I can assure you it would be something that you would not want to hear.

God commands us to praise him as the highest priority because if we do not evil will result. We will do damage to ourselves and to other people. Paul's point in Romans 1:21-23 was that all of the horror of the human race derives from choosing not to praise God but to pursue something else as good. Commanding praise is the only way God could bring about and preserve good in his creation.

Because God wants us to experience good. God also desires that we experience good in our personal lives and he knows that praising him has a powerfully good effect on us. First we need to understand that ***we emulate what we praise.***

Praise is obviously a function of admiration. When we praise something it's because we think so highly of it. If you go to a restaurant that you've heard about and are looking forward to enjoying, but when you're there you experience abominable service and find that the food is barely palatable, do you go and praise that establishment to all of your friends? Obviously not.

Is it not obvious also then that what we admire we would like to become like. Years ago when our kids were young I coached some of Toby's youth hockey teams that he played on. One year there was a player at the college level that made a play in a hockey game that became famous. The player was a fellow named Mike Legg and he was on the University of Michigan hockey team. In one important game with his team down two goals to one he had the puck behind the opponents' net. That's when he did this astounding thing. He picked the puck up off the ice using the blade of his stick, skated around to the side of the net and then stuck the puck into the upper corner of the goal. It was just an absurd move. All the kids in the local hockey leagues were talking about it. They called it a Michigan and were full of praise for what that player did. So what do you suppose that led to? They all tried to work on it in practice. They wanted to emulate it.

When we verbalize praise we are centering our thoughts on the admirable characteristics of something. That reminds us of the thing that we admire and how much we would like to be like it. So when we praise God we actually are impacting the kind of people that we will become. Since God is truly good, the source of all good. If we long to become truly good people a powerful way to help us do that is to continually praise God.

A second way praising God helps us is ***it strengthens our faith.*** In Acts 4 Peter and John, after creating quite a stir by healing a man in Jerusalem, have been arrested and put on trial. It seems bizarre that they should be put on trial for healing a man, but they attributed the healing to Jesus Christ and that was very upsetting to the

authorities of the day. At the end of the trial the authorities knew they had no valid reason to punish them so all they did was threaten them.

We sometimes don't think too much of it because, after all, nothing bad was done to Peter and John. The authorities didn't take anything away from them, they didn't beat them or throw them in jail. But you have to think about what a difficult and intimidating situation that was. They had been threatened by the governing authorities of their nation and were told to never talk about Jesus again. It was a pretty scary situation. Remember that these were the authorities who were responsible for getting the Romans to execute Jesus. What was the response of the Christians to this new ominous situation? According to verses 24-26 when they heard this they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one." After talking about how local authorities had opposed God's anointed one they said in verse 28, "they did what your power and will had decided before hand should happen." Do you hear what their response to the situation was? They're praising God. They are saying "God you are sovereign, you made everything in heaven and on earth. All of those people who oppose you have only managed to carry out your plan."

Psalm 13 begins with the words, "how long, oh Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" David obviously was in severe stress but notice how he ends that Psalm. In verse 5 he says, "but I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me." Nothing has changed in his situation, but what has changed is David. He is praising God for his unfailing love, his goodness and his salvation. He knew that what would give him the most strength is remembering who God is. By praising he is reminding himself of the greatness of God and thus encouraging his own soul.

Haven't you had this experience? You've been in a difficult stretch. Some problem has been weighing on you or maybe there has been some great loss in your life. You drag yourself into church one Sunday morning discouraged, not expecting much, just kind of doing what you know you're supposed to do. You do it even though you're not feeling it. But then we sing the song, *Blessed Be Your Name*. The words are, "Blessed be your name when I'm found in the desert place, though

I walk through the wilderness, blessed be your name. Every blessing you pour out I'll turn back to praise. When the darkness closes in Lord, still I will say blessed be the name of the Lord." Just singing the words reminds you of his goodness to you even in hard times. You are reminded of how God was there when Job's world was falling apart and Job said, "blessed be the name of the Lord." Or maybe we sing the song *Glorious*. "Look inside the mystery, see the empty cross, see the risen Savior victorious and strong. No one else above him, none as strong to save, he alone has conquered the power of the grave. Glorious, my eyes have seen the glory of the Lord. Glorious, he stands above the rulers of the earth." By just singing them you are reminded of the great glory of God. In proclaiming those words and praising God your heart is strengthened and lifted. You come out of the worship service with a whole new perspective and a whole new commitment to trust God. You are reminded there is hope because God is good and God is there with you in the difficulty. You are encouraged and strengthened.

Author Eugene Peterson said, "what do you do when people come to you in distress and assume you can fix their problem? The most important thing a pastor does is stand in a pulpit every Sunday and say, let us worship God." In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan says, "our greatest need in times of greatest need is to have an encounter with the King of glory. To see God as he really is." If you wish to strengthen your faith, if you wish to strengthen your own soul, the best thing you can do is praise God continually.

We are in a spiritual war. Never, ever forget that. We have an enemy who Peter says is as vicious as a roaring lion and is always on the prowl, looking for some way to destroy us. One of his favorite tactics is the one he used against Job. Just hammer this upstart little worm who claims to believe in God. Pound on him with hardship after disappointment after grief and he'll crumble like a sandcastle hit by waves. When we praise God in the midst of such confusing turmoil it puts steel in our own souls, but it does more than that. It also inflicts a major defeat on the enemy. Praise when it feels illogical is a loud statement of faith that sends the enemy away howling in defeat. Furthermore it frightens him for other people see the example and are also strengthened and encouraged by it.

If you wish to encourage other people and strengthen their faith and their souls, the best thing you can do is to verbally praise God. As you do so it draws their hearts and their minds back to the truth who God is and gives them strength as well.

There is another way that praise has a very positive impact on us. Psalm 71:23 says, "my lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you." In Psalm 16 David

wrote in verse 7, “I will praise the Lord who counsels me.” But look at what he says in verse 9. “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices.” David committed himself to praising God and when he did he said his heart was glad in his tongue rejoiced. In other words *praise increases joy in our lives*.

In his book, *Praise: A Matter of Life and Breath*, Ronald Allen wrote, “to the extent that praise is dulled genuine life diminishes.” Great Old Testament scholar, Claus Westermann, wrote in his book, *Praise of God*, “there cannot be such a thing as true life without praise.”

This is not hard to understand. What is your typical response to experiencing or seeing something wonderful? You want to tell people about it. After Michael came home from being deployed in Afghanistan we had a big reception for him and Carissa. They had gotten married with just family in attendance before he left to go to war, so we had their reception with many friends invited after he got back. Immediately after that reception they had a second honeymoon. They went to Bora Bora in the South Pacific. They had a fantastic time in a spectacularly beautiful place. They had imagined what it might be like but neither of them had ever been there before. It proved to be all that they had imagined. So what do you suppose they did when they got home and we got to talk to them? They were eager to enthusiastically tell us all about their time in Bora-Bora. They sang its praises. They told us about the amazing warm turquoise waters, about the spectacular scenery, about their amazing hotel room that was out over the water. They had so much to say.

Why do you suppose they did that? Why do you suppose they brought out the pictures on their phones and showed us some of the scenery? Why didn't they just say, “It was very nice” and leave it at that? Obviously part of the reason was we were interested and were asking, so they were politely responding to our questions. But there was more to it than that. In the process of telling us about their trip and of praising Bora Bora they actually increased their own enjoyment of it. They experienced joy just talking about it. That's the way the human heart is. In fact C.S. Lewis made the point that joys are not really fully experienced until we can share them and praise the thing enjoyed.

This year Christmas is going to be different for us. It is going to be a first for us, as our first grandchild is about to be born. But that changes how we celebrate Christmas. For the first time since Carissa was born we are not going to be with either of our children on Christmas Eve and quite possibly on Christmas Day. Our favorite Christmas traditions are not going to happen. As we got near the season I

found I didn't have the same enthusiasm for decorating as I usually do. Putting up lights outside is always a problem for me because like anything useful I'm no good at it, but I've always wanted to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus. But this year I just didn't have the same enthusiasm because we don't have the family to share it with. But we finally put some lights outside. I do it as a visible way to praise God for what he has done. Funny thing, just having those lights up brought joy to me. Not putting up lights is easier and less costly. But putting them up and visually praising God increased our joy.

You see this on television if you watch a big sports event. People in the stands are there supporting their home team. When the team does a great thing at a crucial point in the game you see them cheering and giving each other high fives. We only know this from television because here in San Diego our teams never do anything good at crucial points. But that's what church is like. We're here cheering for God and giving each other high fives because of who he is.

Here's the point we need to understand. Our joy over something is greatly increased by talking about it. As we increase our praise of God we actually increase the joy we have in him. If we want to increase joy in our lives that we need to increase our praise of God.

So to sum up God wants us to continually praise him because he loves us and wants good for us. When we praise him it causes us to become more and more like him, it strengthens us and increases our faith, and it increases joy in our lives. These are all things that he wants for us. They're all things that we want for ourselves. I key to experiencing them is continually praising God.

APPLICATION

MAKE PRAISE YOUR PRIORITY

Like the early Christians, like the great saints throughout history, make your response to every situation to first praise God. Let's say the same thing to God that David did in Psalm 63:4, "I will praise you as long as I live." And then let's do that.

When I was a kid for a while one of our family's favorite television shows was *The Man From Uncle*. This year, as is Hollywood's habit these days, they made a movie based off that old show. My first reaction was to be eager to see it. Then I read a review of it. My eagerness disappeared. I knew from that review we would not enjoy it. These days with newspapers and Yelp everything is reviewed, movies, plays, restaurants, books, hotels, you name it. What happens when you read a

glowing review? You decide that's what you want. You want to go see that movie, or eat at that restaurant or stay in that hotel. Every day of our lives we are, in effect, issuing reviews of God. Do you want to give him a negative or neutral review? Don't you want to give him a glowing review? That's what praise is.

Let's remember that's why we gather together. We come to church in part to praise God. In so doing we strengthen our souls and encourage others, so let's not forget that or compromise on the crucial importance of that. Whatever else you may want to do on Sunday, no matter how important it is, it cannot keep you focused on the true good, in fact it will distract you from it and push you toward that downward spiral of Romans 1. It cannot make you more like God, it cannot strengthen your faith and it can never produce the joy of the Lord. But it's not just Sunday morning. Our response in every moment of every day must be like that of Job. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, but blessed be the name of the Lord.

PRACTICE PRAISE

Laurie's students often don't practice. She can tell whether they've practiced or not. There's a lesson they often have trouble remembering. If you don't practice, you don't get better. In fact, if you don't practice for any period of time, you get worse.

What does this suggest to you? We need to practice praising God. Praising him is not really something that comes naturally to us. Naturally we are about ourselves. So this is a skill that we have to develop. It is a habit we have to learn. Note that Hebrews 13:15 refers to it as a sacrifice. A sacrifice is not something that happens accidentally or naturally in the course of the day. It is a deliberate, intentional, purposeful, willfully chosen action. To offer the sacrifice of praise means we deliberately, intentionally, purposefully and willfully choose to praise God.

So I want to encourage you this week to practice praising God this week. Choose to praise God at least once a day. Tell someone of his goodness to you. Talk about how thankful you are to him for something he has done.