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Rick Myatt

IT'S CRUCIAL FOR TRICK OR TREATERS Psalm 69:30-31

If you've been on the internet you have likely seen the ads. They often have a rather crudely drawn graphic and they refer to something along the lines of one weird trick. Just doing this one weird thing or eating this one weird food will change your life. The ads purport to enable you to lose belly fat, or cure diabetes, or learn a language, or have more energy, or have a better night's sleep, or even enable your child to do better in school.

Many of these ads are the product of a company back in South Dakota. They often use the word "weird" because it draws people in. They play on the idea that there is one very simple secret that "they," the vague and unknown they, want to keep from you. The suggestion is that big corporate forces are conspiring to keep you from learning the simple solution to your problem. This is why the graphics are usually rather crude. Slick, professional ads smack of big corporate involvement. Just so you will know, these ads are scams. The belly fat ad alone has raked in more than a billion dollars for weight loss supplements that have been proven to be totally ineffective.

Having said all that, today I want to remind you of one weird trick, one simple thing you can do that is guaranteed to improve the quality of your life. You won't have to watch a video to learn about this (though you will have to listen to this talk), and you won't need to give me your credit card. I guarantee you that if you employ this one simple trick, your life will be better. However, it won't do anything about stubborn belly fat. You're on your own with that one.

GIVING THANKS PLEASES GOD

Psalm 69 is quoted a number of times describing the Messiah in the New Testament. It was written by David when he clearly was at a low point. That is why it was so applicable to Christ because he suffered so severely. This Psalm comes right out of suffering.

In verses 3-4 David wrote, "I am worn out from calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail looking for my God." Have you ever felt like that? He was desperate. He pleaded with God, asking him to show up, but to no avail. He said, "Those who hate me without reason are more numerous than the hairs on my head." In my case that wouldn't be all that large of a number, but he meant that

people who were opposing him for no good reason were so thick on the ground it was like they were countless.

The end of verse 4 says, “I am forced to restore what I did not steal.” Think about what he was feeling. He was being accused of stealing things that he had not stolen and was being required to make restitution. Imagine the indignation he felt. My guess is that is a poetic image. He may not have meant that was literally happening but that the attacks on him were so unfair that it created that powerful sense of injustice and indignation. How awful it is to be unfairly accused and judged. Our hearts scream in pain when that happens to us. We cannot stand it and we cry out for vindication, for the wrong to be made right, for the record to be set straight.

I was watching a football game recently and witnessed a scene that will be repeated far too often this year. A receiver was running down the sideline on a long pass play with a defensive back covering him close by running stride for stride with him. Just before the ball arrived the receiver fell and the ball sailed by untouched. Almost immediately a referee’s yellow flag sailed into the scene, indicating he was calling a penalty for pass interference. The DB jumped in the air and howled in protest. Then he put his arms out in the classic sign of a plea for justice from the innocent. Watching it live I thought the call was dubious at best. Then they showed a replay. It was clear that the receiver fell of his own accord. He actually stubbed a toe, causing him to trip and fall. The defender had nothing to do with it. He was outraged, because he was being falsely accused and penalized.

David was experiencing that in a far more significant way. This is in part why people saw Christ depicted to some extent by this Psalm. He was perfectly good and righteous, yet he was accused of blasphemy, of even being demonic by opponents. He was unjustly mocked and ridiculed, and finally tortured and executed.

In verse 19 David said he was “scorned, disgraced and shamed.” He felt like floodwaters were engulfing him. He was drowning in pain and indignation. The Psalm is a plea for God to help him. But then in verse 30 we see how David planned to deal with his terrible circumstances moving forward after he made his plea. He 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.”

David’s counterintuitive plan was to respond to his painful circumstances by giving thanks to God. That is not the usual response when we are in pain. It

certainly is not the norm when our eyes fail looking for God because we need him desperately and he isn't showing up. Nevertheless, that was David's plan. In verse 31 he made a profoundly significant statement. He said that giving thanks to God in his situation would be more pleasing to the Lord than any sacrifice.

Offering sacrifices was a central part of the ancient Jewish religion. Go all the way back to Abraham and you will see him offering sacrifices to God. All you need to do is read the book of Leviticus and you will see the large role that sacrifices played in the law of Moses. What David said in verse 31 was revolutionary. What pleases God more than any sacrifice anyone could ever offer is that they give thanks to God, especially when in crushing circumstances such as David's. People are typically concerned with what they must do to please God. What righteous task must they perform to keep God happy? David insisted that the thing God is most pleased with is that we give thanks to him! That is consistent with what we see elsewhere in the Bible. One of the most familiar statements of this truth is in 1 Thessalonians 5:18. "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 5:20 says we should be "always giving thanks to the father."

Why should we give thanks for everything? Everything in our lives is not necessarily good. We often are not the least bit thankful for what happens. Recently, for instance, the night after I underwent surgery on my arm I was awake at 2 o'clock in the morning with my arm hurting badly. There was no position I could put my arm in that was even close to comfortable. If I managed to arrange a cushion so that the pain was bearable for a bit, the slightest movement would send pain jolting up my arm. Even if I had been able to find some position that would be at least semi-comfortable I couldn't sleep because the pain medication I was on kept me from being able to sleep. It didn't help with the pain at all but it did keep me awake. I must tell you that I did not lie in bed thinking how wonderful it was that I was experiencing such unpleasantness. It was not something anyone would be thankful for. Many of you are dealing with or have dealt with circumstances so much worse than my arm that there is no comparison. I had a choice. I could focus on how unfair this was, how unkind God was being to me, I could be consumed with feeling sorry for myself, or I could do what these verses teach and give thanks.

How was I supposed to do what the Bible told me to do? How was I supposed to give thanks for something that I did not appreciate it at all? God did not expect me to be thankful for the pain and discomfort. He asked me to be thankful in the middle of my pain and discomfort. Even in those difficult hours I have much to be

thankful for. Psalm 7:17 says, “I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness.” Psalm 107:8 says of God’s people, “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love.” Psalm 136:1 says, “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good and his love endures forever.” What if God were not good? What if he was unrighteous? What if his love did not endure forever? We would never be safe, never be at peace and would live in constant terror of what he might do next. We would continuously live in fear that he would stop loving us. Those verses tell us that even when we are in pain we have something to give thanks for. We can and should be giving thanks to God for who he is. We should be giving thanks because he is righteous, good and loving.

In his book titled *Awe*, Paul David Tripp says that we are hard wired for awe. We have a built in capacity for awe, and even more important an inescapable need for it. All of us are searching for it, every single one of us. In our guest bedroom we have a framed photo of Swami’s Beach. The photo says “Big Wednesday” and is dated January 6, 2006. I remember that day very well. It was the biggest swell to hit our shores in the 37 years we have lived here. The waves were taller than our 2 story house. They were the biggest waves I have ever seen in person. I remember being in awe at the enormity of those thunderous waves. The sight of them was awesome, and not merely in the devalued way that word is so often used these days. They were mesmerizing to watch as they thundered on shore. I know we humans are built for awe because the coastline was packed with people who came just to see the awesome sight. They were drawn to awe.

The awe we were created for was not awe for some aspect of creation, but for the creator. God is righteous, good, majestic, glorious, holy and his love endures forever. He is the very definition of awesome. The more we are in awe of God, the more we will have reason to give thanks in everything. In the middle of the night dealing with the misery of great pain and sleeplessness I still had reason to give thanks because God is good, loving, righteous, faithful, wise and glorious. He is truly awesome.

The reason we often fail to give thanks is that we are more awed by our own fear or our felt need for something than we are of God. If we perceived accurately how infinitely awesome God is it would eclipse our obsession with our own circumstances the way the sun eclipses the light of stars during the daytime.

We also have reasons to give thanks because of the great blessings we have been given. No matter how hard our circumstances we are continually being blessed by God in countless ways that we often don’t remember. One of them is the nation we

live in. I read a recent account that reminded me of this. The author went into a restaurant in Malibu. There was a young man in the café who for whatever reason began railing against what he perceived to be the failings of our country. He went on at length about what a mess it is and ridiculed the government. One older gentleman was not buying his rant and clearly tried to ignore him. Seeing this the guy went to his table and sat down. He said, "Sir, if you can tell me one thing the United States has ever done for you, just one measly thing I will leave you alone." The man had been minding his business and eating his soup, but finally he looked up at the radical, set his spoon down and with a heavy Russian immigrant accent said, "Ve hold zeez truz to be self evident, life, liberty, perzuit of happiness." Then he went back to eating his soup. That ended the young man's rant. For all its failings even today we have great reason to give thanks because of where we live. We are even now going through a peaceful transfer of power. No coup necessary, no brutal civil war. Just an election. For that we should always be thankful and never take it for granted.

GIVING THANKS IS ESSENTIAL FOR SPIRITUAL HEALTH

You might be wondering why God makes such a big thing of giving thanks. It is because giving thanks is a crucial part of being correctly related to God. Romans 1:21 tells us that all of the problems of the human race stem from one root. "They did not honor him as God or give thanks." Think about the significance of that. Right this moment and every day of your life you are either full of gratitude to God and pleasing him by doing his will as you give thanks to him, or you are rebelling against him and speeding down the road to death. There really is no in between, no neutral position.

Consider my little situation with my arm. Somehow I had a badly torn tendon in my arm. My problem was I didn't even have a good injury story to tell. Some dramatic story like it happened in a hockey fight or while playing football I felt it blow out or something, but I've got nothing. I don't know how it happened. But tendons can heal. I tried everything, including exotic treatments like platelet injections, to no avail. I tried all of them along with praying, to zero effect. So now I am recovering from surgery with the ultimate outcome still unknown. I have a choice. I can continue to give thanks to God, expressing my thanks that he is good, or I can refuse to do so, thinking he has failed me and that maybe he's not really trustworthy. Those are my only two alternatives.

Just a few weeks ago we went through the annual ritual of extortion we call Halloween. Doesn't anyone else see that we are training children in how to run a criminal enterprise? Trick or treat? In other words, give me some candy or I am

going to do a dirty trick to you. This is like a protection racket. Pay up or something bad will happen to you. Okay, maybe it's not that bad. I really am not too concerned about what tricks a 4 year old girl in a mermaid costume might do to me. But I noticed something. A number of the smaller kids were accompanied by parents who were keeping an eye on them, and several times after the kids got their payoff and turned to go the parents would say to them, "What do you say?" Then the kids would turn around and say "Thank you."

Why did the parents make a thing out of saying thank you? Why are they teaching them to say thank you? Is it merely because they want them to be polite? In some cases yes, but the wise parents know that there is something much larger at stake. Saying thank you is in acknowledgment that what that child was given was something that he or she was not owed. It is a statement that what has been given is a gift. The gift is not something that a person deserves, but is a result of the kindness and grace of the giver. A wise parent teaches the child to say thank you because the alternative is for the child to assume that he is owed something. He or she has merely gotten what they deserve to get. That child will grow up with a sense of entitlement. Likely that child will become a self focused person with lots of expectations and demands of other people.

God makes a big thing out of giving thanks because the same thing will happen to us if we don't live a life of gratitude. We begin to think that we somehow deserve the good things of life. We get expectations of God and we become demanding of him and we fail to acknowledge and realize that every good thing we have is nothing more than a gift of his kindness and grace.

James 1:17 says, "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of the heavenly lights." That tells us everything good that we experience is actually a gift from God. Is it good that you have a life? Well that is a gift from God. Is it good that you can see? Yes it is, which means your sight is a gift from God. Is it good that you were able to move around and breathe today? Yes it is, meaning those things are gifts from God. Everything, everything that is good in our lives is a gift from God.

Let's remember that little four-year-old girl and her mermaid costume at my door on Halloween night. Does she deserve the candy that I put in her bag? Has she earned it by dressing up in a costume and by refusing to do some dirty trick to me? No, that candy that I put into her bag is a function of my kindness and goodness to her. I do not owe her anything. I could just turn off my light and not answer the doorbell when she comes to the door. She would receive no candy. The only

reason that we went to the store and bought bags of candy and we opened our door on Halloween night and put candy into those bags was because we wanted to do something nice for those kids. Honestly, some of them didn't really deserve it. We had a few later in the evening who were young teenagers. They were maybe a little old for this ritual, and honestly their Halloween costumes could be called a costume is only in the most loose sense of that word. They really weren't costumes at all. Furthermore, when I went ahead and put candy in their bags some of them didn't bother to say thank you. But I gave them candy anyway. It wasn't because they earned or deserved it. It was purely a gift out of my kindness to them. And so it is with every good gift that God gives to us. It is all a result of his grace, every single good thing in our lives. Saying thank you not only is right, but it puts us right relationship to God. **Continually giving thanks to God is the antidote to the self obsession, pride, and demanding spirit that is characteristic of human nature.**

There is another aspect to this idea that continually giving thanks is crucial to our spiritual health. Often giving thanks requires considerable faith. There is a family in our church that went through a bad dream scenario years ago. They were excited because they were buying a house. The day after they moved into their wonderful new home the husband, the breadwinner in the family, unexpectedly lost his job. They had a brand new mortgage to pay, and no way to pay it! Yikes. In that situation to give thanks to God requires great faith. The situation feels scary, and it most certainly does not feel good. It is very hard to see God's goodness and provision in that situation.

When we give thanks in situations like that we are making a profound statement that we continue to trust in God and his goodness even when we cannot see it. That statement does two things. First it honors God. It gives him a great glory when we exhibit that kind of trust in God. We begin to resemble Job who was faced with unimaginable disaster in the pain and responded by saying blessed be the name of the Lord. Second remember that faith is like a muscle. Muscles become stronger when we exercise them. And so does faith. As we give thanks to God, affirming our trust in him even in a situation where we can't see his goodness in our current circumstances, we are exercising faith. The result will be that our faith grows stronger.

GIVING THANKS IS CRUCIAL FOR JOY

There is another compelling reason for being a grateful person who continually gives thanks. Psalm 9:1-2 says, "I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you." Did you

notice what goes along with giving thanks to God according to those verses? It is being glad and rejoicing. There is a similar connection in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. “rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

The living Bible translates verse 16 “always be joyful.” How are we supposed to do that? We experience joy as a result. We are joyful because of something. We are joyful because we got a big bonus, because we did unexpectedly well on a test, because a child was born, because our team won the game, because we just got married, and the list goes on. How can we be joyful when our circumstances are not always joyful. Instead of a big bonus we got a cut in pay, instead of acing the test we got a D, instead of a child being born we can’t get pregnant, instead of winning we got blown out, instead of getting married we broke up?

I think Paul went on to give us some ways to do that. Pray without ceasing and give thanks always. As in Psalm 9 there is a connection between giving thanks and being joyful. The discipline of giving thanks actually can change how we think and what we feel. It focuses on the good rather than the negative that human nature gravitates toward and resets our hearts to the positive. Years ago Laurie and I were thrilled to be able to use frequent flier miles to go to Maui. There is a hotel there that we had walked through in the past and marveled at how beautiful it was. We had thought it would be amazing to stay there because it was light years beyond our budget constraints. We put it in the category of things we will never do. It turned out we were wrong about that. That year we tried bidding for a hotel room using Priceline. We figured we would put in a figure that was ridiculously low for luxury resorts because all they could do was say no. We put in a silly bid and were shocked when it was accepted. Our surprise was even more profound when we saw which hotel had accepted our bid. It was that beautiful hotel we were sure we could never stay at. Our bid was about a third the normal cost of a room there. When we went we were so excited. It led to a moment that has lived on in our memory. So thrilled, when we first went into our room Laurie said, “Sweet!” I responded, “No, it’s just a room.” We were thrilled to be there and were thankful. We couldn’t believe how fortunate we were. That first day I went to the hotel front desk for some forgotten reason. While I was there I could not help but over hear the conversation nearby between a man staying at the hotel and the hotel employee at the desk. The man had not approved of the first room he and his family have been given and had demanded that they moved to a better room. The hotel had accommodated him and gave him a better room but he still was not happy with it. From the description of it I realized it was a very nice room with a beautiful view but he felt it was not up to his standards. He had insisted that they give him some

perks to make up for his disappointment. They had actually bent over backwards and had extended him very nice pluses .but he still wasn't satisfied. He was complaining and demanding more. He was grumpy and complaining. Here's the question. Who do you think enjoyed their stay more at that hotel? Him or me? I can assure you that it was me. And what was the main difference? It wasn't the circumstances, because he had a better room and more perks than I did. The difference was I was just thankful for the amazing opportunity that I had to be there and he wasn't. Being thankful to our great joy in that situation

US News and World Report published an article a few years back titled Happiness Explained. It reported that studies showed people who make a daily practice of being thankful are “not only more joyful, they are healthier, less stressed, more optimistic, and more likely to help others.” Would you like to be a more joyful person? Then become a more thankful person. The more you give thanks to God and every situation that you encounter the more joyful you are going to be.

Academy award winning actor Denzel Washington recently has been talking about the fact that he reads his Bible every day. A year ago at a banquet he urged his audience to live continually with gratitude for God's goodness. He said, “ give thanks for blessings every day. Every day. Embrace gratitude. Encourage others. It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. I pray that you put your slippers away under your bed at night, so that when you wake in the morning you have to start on your knees to find them. And while you're down there say thank you. A bad attitude is like a flat tire. Until you change it, you are not going anywhere.”

Here are 4 action points I want to suggest for you:

1. Thank someone today for some specific way they have blessed you.
2. Tell someone today something you want to thank God for.
3. Thursday as part of your celebration of Thanksgiving actually spend time thanking God.
4. Between now and the end of the year start each day and end each day by thanking God.