



PROFESSIONAL CHRISTIAN COACHING TODAY

Chris McCluskey & Kim Avery

*The podcast dedicated to Raising the Standard of Coaching...
and Changing the World*

Episode 008

Gratitude: The Hidden Benefits of Thankfulness with Susan Whitcomb, PCC

CHRIS: We have a very fun Thanksgiving special edition of our podcast today and not just for Thanksgiving, I think actually you'll find that our topic applies to every single day of the year. We have with us today a very special guest, a friend actually, a dear friend of Kim and I both, Susan Whitcomb. Susan Whitcomb is the founder and president of The Academies which is a coach training program that specializes in brain friendly coach training for corporate and executive coaching. She is author of seven books. She has developed extensive coach training curriculum that is approved by the International Coach Federation, which you know we emphasize and inter aligned with ourselves. Susan actually teaches on faculty here a course for us at Professional Christian Coaching Institute. She teaches in career coaching. She's a person with many gifts and many interests. She has a particular gift for taking complex neuroscience principles - that would be brain stuff - and making it very understandable and applicable to everyday coaching. She is actually probably the foremost authority in the Christian coaching world right now on brain-based research applied to a coaching format. She has taken personalized training through leaders

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from the Academy of Brain-Based Leadership and The Applied Neuro Science Institute. In fact through that organization she became the only licensed neuro positive coach from that organization to be awarded their master level designation. We've got a specialist for you here in an area of applied coaching that specifically looks at how do our brains interact with questions, with the relational components of coaching, with God in the middle of our relationship as Christian coaches, and all kinds of good things. So she is specifically going to address with us today items having to do with gratitude. Susan, welcome.

SUSAN: My pleasure to be here, Chris, thank you and Kim.

KIM: Yeah, it's a joy to have you here. I know along with being able to teach for you in your certified career management class, I've also sat through your brain-based success coach class and just ate up all the wisdom that you've acquired on our behalf in terms of the brain-based science and how that can really inform what we do so we can be as excellent as we can be. If you don't mind leading off, tell us a little bit about your journey and how you got interested in neuroscience.

SUSAN: It's kind of an interesting process. I really have to feel like the Lord just wanting to complete me and make me more finished, I think, in my coaching journey when he sort of planted this desire to understand what was going on in our bodies while we're doing this thing called life. Kim, you know having instructed for us in the past that we talk about the mindset and mechanics, the M&Ms of life, and so often, when people come to us as coaches, they want something. They want to move from point A to point B, and often times, they are very concerned about the mechanics of how to do that. What's the strategy? If it's a leader, how do I get my team to be more bought in? If it's a job seeker, How do I navigate them the job search landscape, whatever it might be if it's a person trained to get more life balance, what are the things I need to do around that? And so I think we focus a lot on what are those mechanical things but then I always noticed that so often, clients wanted something but they ended up either shooting themselves on the foot or their confidence was an issue, or they had these beliefs that just sort of held them back. As coaches of course, we look at limiting

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beliefs. So there's the mindset piece, right? As I move through coaching, I would work with beliefs, I work with affirmations, I work with exploring beliefs and helping people kind of appear at them from different angles, and what I finally recognized was that it was more than just a mind job. It was really of a body job as well. What I mean by that, anybody can relate to this I would imagine that you say, "I am successful" or "I have a six-figure business" or "I've lost 30 lbs" or whatever it might be, you're telling yourself these affirmations but inside your body, you're feeling your heart fluttering, you're feeling your stomach kind of nervous, you're feeling your tension in your shoulders. All of those things are sort of working against you so no matter what your mind is saying like, "I can do this," at the same time your body is saying, "Uh-uh, no we can't." No we can't, right? So that's where the neuroscience piece came in and I started looking at what was physiologically happening underneath all of those desire, good kinds of thoughts and what's happening from a very basic, basic framework is that we're either in this sort of fight-flight mode. Everybody has heard of the fight-flight mode, or on the other end of the spectrum, we're in sort of the calm, connect peace possibility, empower execute sort of mode. So the question really then becomes at the bottom of anything that anybody wants to do is how do I connect with that peace possibility mode as opposed to that fight-flight space. I think from a Biblical standpoint, this is really aligned with what God's word tells us, right? He talks about the fruit of the Spirit, not being worry, anxiety, and frustration. He talks about the fruit of the Spirit being peace, love, joy, and gratitude for the topic of the day, right?

The interesting piece is that when we start to understand just very basic science about what's happening in our body, when we are not in that peace possibility mode but in that fight-flight mode, we really can start to understand how we start making changes. So just for a little quick science lesson, fight-flight most people have heard that that kind of shoots up your cortisone and your adrenaline, and we know that if we get too much cortisone and adrenaline in our system that that's not good for us. Our immune system starts to get sort cannibalized, which is kind of a scary thought. Our reproductive system starts to go down. Our digestive system starts to have problems.

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all of those resources that are meant to make our body whole and healthy end up going out to this fight-flight response of wanting to run away, fight, defend, whatever it might be, and cortisol, too much of it is not a good thing. I talk about cortisol creep in our lives and I feel like maybe a great little metaphor or analogy for this is thinking about a car that you have and you live in an area where during the winters they have to salt the roads a lot. That's not the case for me. My husband grew up in that kind of area. If you take your car out on the road everyday during the winter and they've put lots of salt on the road, what happens to the undercarriage?

KIM: It rusts out. I grew up in Chicago. Exactly, it rusts out.

CHRIS: There you go, it rusts out and yet we are not aware that that is necessarily happening. We are just chugging along on the road thinking, "I'm getting to work, I'm getting home. I'm going to the grocery store. Everything is okay." The next thing we know, we've got this rust that's really practically irreparable. The same thing can happen in our lives. We go through the day and we don't realize that those subtle tiny worries of, "Gosh, am I going to say the right thing on this podcast? Is my technology going to work? Oh my gosh, what about the to do list that I have to do after I get off of this? I should have worked longer and harder this weekend." All of those concerns that start to pile up actually cause this cortisol creep that we're not even aware of and we become so used to living in this sort of heightened state of "I've got to get it all done. Am I going to be okay? Am I going to be good enough?" This little subtle worry that it absolutely depletes our resources, the blood flow moves away from the creative part of our brain when we do that. That's a quick way of saying, the shortened version of what happens when we're operating in that fight-flight.

CHRIS: Wow, Susan, you just unpacked for us a really powerful metaphor there of what happens to us at a subtle but very definite and ongoing basis with cortisol creep as a result of kind of staying on a perpetual state of fight or flight, and then you're contrasting that with a different modus operandi, a different mindset that you're calling peace and possibility. Can you give us a metaphor for that one or help us what that looks like?

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SUSAN: Let me go to the opposite of the cortisol adrenaline just to help sort of explain that. I believe that God, when He tells us that He came to give us life and life more abundant, that part of that was absolutely peace. Part of that was calm, part of that was hope, part of that was love, joy, all of those fruits of the Spirit. What happens when we experience those things? God has His own little divine dopamine that allows us to feel better. Have you ever been in a hospital or seen somebody in a hospital who has had some severe injuries and they give them these little morphine pump and they can actually press it anytime that they are experiencing that. I just saw the movie 90 Minutes in Heaven and that dear gentleman that died and came back to life, he was so damaged. He had this little morphine pump. What happens is that when we focus on gratitude, when we focus on love and peace, it's as if we have our little thumb pushing on that dopamine dispenser in our brains. When that dopamine floats through us, you know what that feels like. It's that endorphine. It's a sort of similar to morphine. You get that sense of peace and it washes over you. Those are the things that help you improve your immune system. Those are the things, some of the research that has been done shows that we become more creative. We become more resilient. We see bigger connections and in coaching, you know that when people can see instead of just this little narrow focused, hyper focused vision of what's going on, if they can see that bigger picture, if they can make different connections, that's what helps us move forward and reframe and find new meaning in the difficulties of life or find new meaning from how we used to be to how the Lord is leading us to be. It's really kind of a matter of chemistry and we get so programmed to dealing with our worry. We think about, "I don't want to worry." We think about what it's doing to us and as we're thinking about how to deal with it, all we're doing is increasing the neural connections in our brain about worry instead of focusing on gratitude, joy, attaching to those things as opposed to attaching to how do I make sure I don't worry. It's a subtle shift. Some of the research shows that if you spend one hour thinking about one particular positive thing that you actually double the number of synapses and connections in your brain around that particular thought. So you can rewire your brain with some intention around this.

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KIM: Wow. You mentioned earlier about the M&Ms, the mindset and the mechanics and how it's easier to focus on the mechanics and not this mindset piece, but then you talked about how our body doesn't always come into alignment with what our brain things. The question that comes up for me then is what if somebody is not particularly feeling grateful? They are not feeling thankful for something because things are so bad or they have been in this worried state for so long. How do they get their mind and their body to cooperate in this exercise of gratitude?

CHRIS: This is the Professional Christian Coaching Institute. Let's frame this in the context of Christian concepts. We know that the Holy Spirit lives within us. We know that we have Christ in us, the hope of glory. If our brain and body is saying, "I'm in a tough spot. This is really hard. I don't have a job or I might be risking losing my job. I can't get my team to do whatever I need them to do," whatever those circumstances are you name it, if we can just pause for a moment and remind ourselves of who God is, who He is in us and what we know to be true. If you can kind of center back on that, that is one of the fastest ways of being able to get back in touch with that sense of gratitude. So just pausing for a moment, taking a belly breath, taking a deep breath, and reminding ourselves, "I know that the Father has said that He will never leave me and never forsake me," just letting that wash over you. That's one of the fastest way to get back in touch with that feeling. I know that even though I've made mistakes, that perhaps I've hurt people in the things that I've done I didn't want to and I've asked for forgiveness, I know that faithful is He. He has cleansed me from all unrighteousness. I know that to be true. If you can just get hold of the feel of those things to start with, that's a good way to kind of get back in touch.

KIM: Well you said such an important word there when you said the word "truth" because we know that the enemy, Satan, is a liar and the father of lies. That's what he's always about. I like to introduce that topic with that question sometimes to my clients, in this situation, what do you know to be true? As believers, it's beautiful that we do know that we know that we know that He keeps all his promises and all of that other stuff

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that gets kicked up really is a lie of the enemy, because God does have our best interest at heart. That's a terrific reminder.

CHRIS: Susan, you raised a point that actually triggers an article that I just read on a piece of brain science research applied to coaching and it was looking at this very topic for today of gratitude, and one of the points that was made in the article was that the research showed that when persons are doing what we as Christians have often heard through the old hymn, "Count your blessings. Name them one by one. Count your blessings. See what God has done." We know we're to put our minds on those kinds of things, whatever things are good and pure and of good report.

SUSAN: Right.

CHRIS: You think on those things but this research was saying that they found that when persons were saying "Well, I don't have anything to be grateful for. Everything is a mess right now and in fact, by many external measures, you might say, "Yeah, they really are in a bad space right now." Nevertheless, they found that when the person began trying to put the mind in a state of being grateful, even if they couldn't specifically articulate a lot of things, there was a shift that happened, a different portion of the brain lit up on the MRI scans as soon as they began to kind of wait in the presence of the possibility that there might be things to be grateful for. Already, the brain had shifted from one center of operation to a different center. It's as if we got a new set of lenses through which to view the world and our circumstance, and then as you said with that little metaphor of the morphine pump, then by golly, our body already starts kicking in some good stuff and of course there are always things to be grateful for.

SUSAN: I love what you just pointed out there. I was working with someone this weekend, a client, and I won't reveal the circumstances of her particular situation for confidentiality, but if you had heard her story, you would probably say, "Oh my goodness, wow. That, that, and that happened too? Oh my gosh!" The client actually said, "If somebody tells me that they don't get what I'm going through, that is not

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helpful to me. If they say just sort of, “Buck up and be grateful, that is not helpful to me.” I’m sitting there listening to this thinking, “And yet I know how gratitude can change the whole structure of things.” As a coach, I’m thinking, “I have great compassion for this particular situation and this woman who has been incredibly perseverant and going through some very difficult things. So one way to sort of look at how do you shift towards somebody that’s feeling like “Do you not get how much I’m suffering?” You don’t want to say, “Jus be grateful.”

KIM: Right, Pollyanna.

SUSAN: Right, right and so this is where I feel like that neuroscience piece can be very helpful for us as coaches to be able to say in a nonjudgmental sort of way, “So what’s happening here?” It’s interesting to look at what’s happening chemistry wise in the body. I don’t say “your body, my body.” You say “in the body.” When the frustration, when the hopelessness, when all of those things are in place that that is actually just working against you, pulling some of your creative resources, stealing your joy certainly, and then talk about a little bit of the adrenaline cortisol crash and how that depletes the system, and then talking about the other side of that coin, the dopamine, the oxytocin. So then [inaudible 18:27] reposing so what kinds of things allow you to be able to press that little dopamine button. So opening that up just in a really nonjudgmental curious manner and that was helpful. I got a text from this person, the client, probably 30 minutes after we hung up and she said, “I cannot believe it. I already feel so much better.”

CHRIS: Oh my.

KIM: Wow.

CHRIS: And I sent her a green heart gratitude text so that’s one of the practical ways of how we can really start looking at pushing that dopamine pump.

KIM: What are some other ways?

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SUSAN: So let me explain the green heart gratitude first. I learned this from a mentor at A&I, one of places I've done some studying. I've done this now for probably eight weeks, one day, haven't failed. I think I missed a couple of days but I was doing it verbally with somebody. Basically, you take about 2 minutes pause and think about someone that you are grateful for in your life. You send them a quick little text that says, "This green heart represents gratitude. I send it in appreciation for [fill in the blank.]" You want it to be something specific about that person. Kim, I chose one of your attributes as you know. I sent that text to you. Chris, I chose one of the values that you hold near and dear. When you acknowledge someone's strengths or their values and how that has impacted you, this sort of energy that just comes. You can feel that dopamine coming over you. You can feel the goose bumps. You can feel the lightness. You can feel your heart slowing down and I would venture to say, put myself on the spot here, that when you receive that text, you probably felt happy as well.

KIM: Yeah, the dopamine pump worked both ways.

SUSAN: Yes, it does and then that's the oxytocin that also gets released. I mean we know what oxytocin is related to but the bonding kind of thing and the social connection. The Lord wants us to be together and work together. He wants us to be connected and interconnected and lifting one another up. I just see this physiological connection and the spiritual connection coming together so beautifully.

CHRIS: Isn't it something how the Lord wired our bodies. People so easily can fall into when you're in a bad space in life into drug addiction, drug abuse of various substances that mankind can now manufacture and somebody can alter their mood state by injecting, sniffing, or smoking, or popping various kinds of drugs. We see it's an epidemic proportions particularly in Western civilization, a time when we have many, many things for which to be grateful and yet persons are struggling in many ways, and so they look to alter mood with things that we know then just further wear down and destroy their lives. We grieve over when we wrestle with drug addiction, pushers, and all. What you're really saying here, if this isn't pushing the metaphor too far, Susan what you're saying is that when you're sending these gratitude hearts to people and

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you're specifically identifying things that you're grateful for in their lives, their values, their characteristics, things that God has given to them, the things they are allowing to show forth through them that are representations of God to the world, you're saying, you get a hit. You get a drug high and the person on the other end of the reception, "Last night, you were my pusher. You pushed some stuff my way. I took it and boy I felt..." I know we're playing with the metaphor and yet I also know what we're saying something is actually is absolutely true. These brain chemicals, these neurochemicals in our bodies are provided by our Creator because they do alter mood states, they do buoy us up through very difficult trials. He equipped us with a healthy nondestructive manner of accessing them through good -by encouraging, by meditating upon beauty, by valuing relationship, by encouraging others, by helping and serving, or by receiving. The Lord wired us to receive in our physical bodies something through our minds that is healthy and furthers His Kingdom work, quite the opposite of how the enemy comes and mimics it and destroys through brain altering kinds of things, just quite an aha moment if we really think about the implications.

KIM: Which then kinds of beg the question, is it possible to be too grateful?

CHRIS: Good question.

SUSAN: I'm so Pollyanna, right, to the rescue. You know it's interesting, there are some research that's out around the sort of best practice ratio of gratitude or positivity versus negativity. Some of the researchers on that would be Barbara Fredrickson and Losada. There's an article in Harvard Business Review about this as well that said somewhere between 3:1 to 5:1 as sort of the right ratio for positive gratitude kinds of comments versus negative comments. What I find interesting is that if you are too positive, you might be sort of living in the land of denial.

KIM: Right.

SUSAN: The Lord is so gracious. If we're too positive, if we're missing important things, let's say that I'm behind in my bills and I say, "It's okay. The Lord is great and it's going to work out okay. Everything is fine and rosy," but I still got bills to pay that I'm not

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paying, that's eventually going to come back to bite me, right? God is gracious enough to say, "There are things I want you to pay attention to. There are things and circumstances and consequences that will come from your actions."

CHRIS: Susan, you know what's coming to my mind as you're sharing that is we know that Scripture paints for us Jesus as the perfect man, fully God, fully man and it describes Him as a man of sorrows. He was acquainted with grief. He suffered not just in Gethsemane and on the cross. He was a man who knew deeply in the human plane what it was to suffer. He had that fight or flight portion of his brain activated. We see Him turning over the tables. We see him grieve. We see him calling out the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He was a man who had full access to the full range of His human emotions and it is through Him and the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures that we hear all the rest of what rounds out the story of how the fruits of the Spirit are, all of these positive things and that we are to meditate on these things, think on these positive things. So it was a very balanced picture painted for us through Christ Himself of how mankind must not air too far on one side nor too far on the other side. We do live in a fallen world. There is grief, there is suffering. There are pressures. Thank goodness God did wire that fight or flight part of our brain. We need that to kick us in the hind and get us moving on paying those bills or taking care of whatever needs to be addressed. I just love the balance that we have there in the world view that is provided for us by our Savior.

SUSAN: Right and I think too that you can take that gratitude ratio and say to yourself, "All right, if I need to pay my bills and I feel like I don't have enough money in the bank account right now to do that," instead of just, "I'm grateful that I'm going to be okay," go to "I'm grateful that I have the Holy Spirit residing in me to give me the wisdom of the ages, to come up with ideas for how to pay those bills." I'm grateful that I have a social network of people who support me and I can reach out to for ideas on how to market, Kim. I'm grateful that I have those things. God tells us that he has given us everything we need for life and godliness. That includes the ideas, the patience, the

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perseverance, the strength to be able to move forward towards those things that He has called us to do.

KIM: Yeah. It reminds me of that verse that in everything with prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, it's almost when we're asking our request of Him when we do tap into the thanksgiving for who He is and what He will provide, it moves our brain into that place of possibility where we can actually see those other options so much easier than when we're in kind of our nay saying doubting stage of mind.

SUSAN: Right. I have fun little planned words that I sometimes use related to that. There's prayer, there's praise, and then there's what I call prayse. A prayer is "Father I need help with this situation." Praise is, "Father, you answer every pray and you meet every need." Prayse which is the pray kind of combined with praise, "Father, thank you for providing the wisdom and solutions for this situation." When we go to that space, that's gratitude.

CHRIS: Kim, I'm going to go back to one of the questions you posted earlier about other ways that we can activate this gratitude center in our brain and we can generate more of this positivity because that's a perfect example right there, Susan. In addition to your sending of these green hearts of gratitude and choosing specific things to focus on, and the way that we come before the Father with prayers and petitions, I'm recalling the very difficult days of my launch into coaching when I was starting to practice and boy, the phone wasn't ringing like I needed it to be ringing. I was facing all kinds of struggles in this dirt road in the country trying to get the word out about my services. I can recall so clearly purchasing several books that I read on purpose because they were books about other person's struggles through entrepreneurial ventures. I was reading a book called "Unstoppable." Each chapter was just somebody's story about the challenges they faced in pursuing the song of their heart, launching their business, how difficult it was, but you get to the end of the story, you hear the positive things that come out, sometimes not in spite of but even because of those difficult challenges that they faced. That very intentional reading, somebody sent me a book from the Chicken Soup series called Chicken Soup for the Entrepreneur, same kind of stuff. You're

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choosing to read or to listen to the testimony, to share stories with others in a mastermind group of facing difficult challenges and hearing others say, “And this is the good fruit that came from it,” and boy did that buoy up my mood state when what I was actually facing at that time was not enough money coming in and too much money going out, not enough levers to pull on yet to make it all happen as quickly as I’d like. Intentional choice about what we bring into our mind, what things we seek to access, what conversations we looked we look to generate because they will help lift us up. Are there other things like that that come to mind, Susan, that we can intentionally do to help activate this gratitude part of our minds?

SUSAN: I would just affirm that what you’re describing there, picking up that book and reading those inspiring stories, that’s like that little dopamine pump. That just absolutely washes over you and that wash, that chemical wash throughout your brain and body then releases more creativity, gives you more strength, gives you more energy to pick up the phone and make calls or reach out to your social network for more support, so whatever it is that does give you that sort of bump. Social interaction, in some of the research, social interaction is a big piece of that as well. We’ve talked about like the green heart gratitude texts. I think it’s also interesting to extend that not just to, the body of Christ, the people that surround us but to ourselves. We talked earlier about what we know to be true about God, that sort of relationship, social interaction with the Lord. We talked about other people. Within ourselves, there’s often a tendency to beat ourselves up for not having it right yet, not being perfect, for making a mistake and when we make those mistakes, we know that there is forgiveness, but I think sometimes we end up in the beating up of ourselves and we know what that can sound like, “Oh, you blew that one” or “You’re not as good as somebody else” or “Somebody else has so much more than you do in terms of clients or whatever it might be. That again causes that cortisol creep, that subtle rise in our adrenaline and cortisol. If we can take ourselves and say, “I’m going to be compassionate to myself, as compassionate as Jesus would be to me. I am going to be that way to me as well.” I think that’s another sort of gratitude exercise that can help get us out of that chemical

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cortisol watch. So that's another important social interaction with ourselves that can be part of this.

KIM: Absolutely and a tool to train our clients in and encourage our clients in as well. How would you pose that as a question to a client? If you were in a coaching session and they have this down on self mindset, what would you do?

SUSAN: I think what I might do, and this is where I share more and more little tidbits in an educational format and then I'll ask the question. So the educational tidbit that I might share would be to share something like, "There was a fascinating research study that talked about what happens in our bodies when we feel compassion versus when we feel empathy." What happens is that when we feel empathy towards someone, the amygdale, that fight-flight area of the brain lights up and that's where you can just feel so bad for somebody. We can feel that way towards ourselves. If you feel compassion towards yourself, a completely different part of the brain lights up more in that prefrontal cortex which isn't going to shoot off that cortisol and adrenaline. I would then say to the client, "So if you think about the most compassionate thing," again chemical reactions here we're talking about, "The most compassionate thing that you could say to yourself right now, what would that be or if Jesus were just sitting right here," and He is indeed sitting right here.

KIM: Beautiful.

CHRIS: What a good and timely message for us. Susan thanks so much for coming, sharing, and challenging us with something that I think as we all prepare for Thursday's big feast here in the States at least that we call Thanksgiving, or as any of us seek to gather around a table with loved ones, and even if it's just a table by ourselves before the Lord. As you said, He is always present with us, to very intentionally consciously count our blessings to really step into a space of gratefulness, and journaling perhaps, meditating certainly, searching the Scriptures, identifying those many, many things, countless things that we truly have to be grateful for and allowing as our bellies fill, maybe that we don't just push away from the table and race off to the television set too

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quickly to watch that football game, but we instead allow that wonderful chemical rush that is so much more than just physiological. It is the Lord in that bridge between the spiritual world and this physical world and the [inaudible 34:51] part of self – the mind, the will, and the emotions – giving us a reminder that it really is good to be in the space of gratefulness before me and I'm going to bless you for that. I'm going to reward you for that right now. It's a good reminder as we settle into the holiday.

KIM: Absolutely. For those of you who would like to connect with Susan Whitcomb and find out more about her and the wonderful trainings she does, you can just go to TheAcademies.com and look at some of the wonderful programs that Susan offers. If you're feeling that nudging from the Lord to further step into this full life that God has offered to all of us, I would encourage you to go to ProfessionalChristianCoachingToday.com and pick up your Align Your Life assessment which will give you a quick check up with God.

CHRIS: All right gang, there it is. Until next time, keep raising the standard of coaching and changing the world.

KIM: God's richest blessings to you.