

“And in Everything Give Thanks”

MARVIN J. ASHTON

Thank you, President Seamons. Today I hope my message will bring new consideration and meaning to those two important words *thank you*. Frankly, over the years I have been troubled by the admonition contained in D&C 98:1: “Verily I say unto you my friends, fear not, let your hearts be comforted; yea, rejoice evermore, *and in everything give thanks*” (emphasis added).

My inability to give thanks in all things, particularly those events or occasions that have caused disappointment, delay, and misunderstanding, has given me concern. My capacity to express thanks in everything has been quite inadequate. Without “the passing of time factor” I would have failed miserably.

Appreciation for all people and events that come into our lives is most important because it is God’s way of helping us to grow. The ultimate maturity is being able to feel and express appreciation promptly, being fully aware of the value and importance, and showing gratitude for it. How does God feel about giving thanks? In the Doctrine and Covenants we read: “And in nothing doth man offend God, or against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hand in all things, and obey not his commandments” (D&C 59:21).

Would you like to have God’s wrath raised against you? Would you like to have God angry with you? It can happen, and it will happen if we fail to show gratitude. Why does the lack of appreciation offend God and kindle his wrath? Not because he needs necessarily to see and hear our thanks, but because he knows an absence of appreciation on the part of anyone causes personal stagnation. Our growth and our progress are delayed when we fail to feel and express a sincere thank-you.

May we think for a few moments about occasions and situations where we actually say, “Thank thee, God, for the people and events that have come into our lives that have made it possible for us to develop and grow and mature, yes, for all people, for all conditions, and for all circumstances that allow us to give thanks to human beings and situations for what they can do and will mean to us.”

How do you measure up in giving thanks in everything? Let me lead your minds into a

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few areas where hesitation or delay may leave you quiet instead of expressing present-time gratitude.

How well do you do in giving thanks for yet unanswered prayers? Are you able to give thanks to God when there is delay or silence in matters that are of great concern to you? We would remind you as you ponder and yearn for quick responses to important needs that sometimes the right answer could be no answer.

Are you able to give thanks for dress codes and conduct standards that seem to be restrictive and unnecessary for your personal needs?

It takes a certain amount of courage and maturity to thank in your heart and in words those who would teach modesty and good grooming by lofty standards and personal respect. Are you able to say “thank you” for enrollment in an institution of higher education, even BYU, and for administrators and instructors who expect you to better manage self-discipline and long-range priorities?

Can you bring yourself to give thanks for campus guidelines that seem to be just a little much? Are you wise enough to give thanks when you are inconvenienced by regulations that appear to take away freedom of choice? Are you able to give thanks for a campus honor system that is unique and demanding? Sorry but true, some of us would rather murmur than measure up. You are special students and friends who can and will, I hope, someday be able to give thanks for guidelines that on some occasions may seem unimportant and unnecessary, yet are self-discipline builders.

Are you able to accept a responsibility, particularly one that seems beyond your grasp and comprehension, with a simple “Thank you, Heavenly Father” for an unplanned calling? When I think of my being named a member of the Council of Twelve, I never remember over the years ever saying, “Thank you, Father in Heaven, for this calling.” Many, many are the times I have thanked him for his trust,

strength, and guidance, but never for the calling. Perhaps someday I will be mature enough to so declare. In the meantime, as I grow older and, I hope, wiser, the thank-you will continue to be for ongoing support.

Can you give thanks when physical limitations are constant and trying? I am thinking of a close friend of mine who died recently. He spent the majority of his life in a wheelchair. Shortly before he passed away, we had an intimate conversation. He said, among other things, “Looking back now, I am glad for the pluses of wheelchair life. It brought special experiences, people, opportunities, and tender relationships I would have never experienced if my mobility had not been restricted.”

Can you give thanks when you are trying to climb an extra high mountain in your life of hills and valleys? Oftentimes we pray for strength to make it to the summit in life’s journeys, and the Lord seemingly adds elephant-sized burdens to our backs to carry up steep and trying paths.

Can you give thanks in grief? Can you express appreciation to God for sustaining power when certain pain and anguish seem to be beyond your power to cope?

Can you give thanks when appropriate discipline comes into your life? Many of us have a tendency to complain rather than conform to needed repentance procedures. Can you give thanks when a decision or ruling against you seems unfair and unreasonable? Some of us give thanks in victories, but never in defeat or undeserved delays.

Can you give thanks sincerely each time you give a blessing on your daily food?

Recently I had an urgent challenging assignment. It was not family, neighbor, or church related. It was a new experience. I felt ill-prepared. After a crash preparation procedure and humble prayer, we somehow successfully completed the taxing task. Upon returning to my office, I knelt down and was

impressed to utter only two words, "Thank you."

Can you thank God on a continuing basis for people who share challenges, love, and lift?

Let us take the time for thank-yous while we may be heard and others are able to hear.

I have in my possession two letters, among others, that are years old. They are cherished thank-you notes, simple but enduring. One is from Frank Riggs, Jr., of Montgomery, Alabama. His came following a multistake conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Frank is a returned missionary from Denmark. He came home early when multiple sclerosis struck his healthy body.

Dear Elder Ashton:

Thank you for the thoughts and spirit you shared at our multistake conference this past weekend in Atlanta. It was a fairly strenuous experience for me with my limitations, but well worth the effort. Maintaining a level of involvement in service-related activity is very important to me—I am perniciously vulnerable, as one might guess, and determined to avoid the quagmire of self-concern, and your closing remarks yesterday gave me a fresh awareness of my possibilities in this area.

Thank you for reading my letter. It was no great chore to write it, though the job had to be done somewhat piecemeal. Sorry about the misstrikes, but, as we say, "Them's the breaks." And I tried to do my best.

Bedridden and with little or no use of his arms and legs, he put the correspondence together with his typewriter and a pen. He typed his letter to me with the movement of his head moving the pen in his mouth.

The other letter came to me from an FBI agent in New York. He said, "I am here involved in a very, very important case. The days are long and the nights are longer because I am away from my family. I have had a little bit of time to think. As I have been thinking, I am impressed to write you a letter."

In the letter he didn't say, "I am thankful you are a member of the Council of Twelve Apostles." He said, "I want to thank you for what you did for me when I was a deacon, teaching me to be true to myself, my family, and my Church. I will never forget your interest in me. You taught me to try and be a one hundred percenter. Thank you."

As we visit with missionaries, we often ask them to stand up and tell us where they are from, bear their testimonies, and tell us about their companions and their parents. This is a great experience in learning about them and what their thought processes are and what their senses of values are.

I recall one missionary standing up and saying, "I have been in the mission field nine months, and I have had five companions." With a quivering chin and a choked-up voice, he said, "Never once in nine months have I had a companion who told me he loved me or thanked me for what I was doing for him. I hope and pray that someday, somehow, I'll have a companion who will tell me that he loves me and openly expresses gratitude."

No matter where we come from, no matter what our family conditions are, we should learn and be appreciative of those circumstances that can build and lift us.

I recall another missionary who said, "Two weeks before I was to go see my bishop and get the missionary forms and papers processed, I had some doubts. I had some questions about the future and even about the Church. I walked into the living room and interrupted my father, who was watching television, and said, 'Dad, I'm not so sure about this Joseph Smith business. I'm not so sure I know the Church is true. I'm not so sure I want to go out and represent it. I have a lot of questions, and I have a lot of misgivings.'

"When I said that, my father walked over and turned off the television, took the cigarette he had in his hand and smashed it in the ashtray, took the can of beer he had in his other

hand and put it down on the table, and said, 'Son, I want you to know that I don't do very much about it, but I know that the Church of Jesus Christ is true and that Joseph Smith is a prophet. I want you to hear me say it because I know that better than most anything else in this world.'"

This young man then said, "I want my father to know that I appreciate him. He has some habits that he's not proud of. He has some habits that I'm not proud of. But he is my father, and he has a testimony. I'm pleased I even told him on that occasion 'Thank you for being my dad.'"

That kind of appreciation, that kind of maturity, will not only help a missionary to grow and develop, but will also be a great anchor in life's paths. A sincere thank-you will cause most of us to share and perform more worthily in the days that follow.

The most common question missionaries ask me is, "Elder Ashton, what can I do to get my mother or father or brother or sister more active in the Church? I realize now what they are missing and what they need. What can I do to get them active in the Church? What can I do to get them to become members of the Church?"

In every case and every situation I have taken the opportunity to say, "The best way to get your family members active in the Church or to become members is to tell them 'thank you' for all they do to support you and tell them how much you love them." We need to express appreciation on a continuing basis, to love family members and neighbors into the Church.

John Powell shares this touching experience:

It was the day my father died. . . . In the small hospital room, I was supporting him in my arms, when . . . my father slumped back, and I lowered his head gently onto the pillow. I . . . told my mother. . . :

"It's all over, Mom. Dad is dead."

She startled me. I will never know why these were her first words to me after his death. My mother said: "Oh, he was so proud of you. He loved you so much."

Somehow I knew . . . that these words were saying something very important to me. They were like a sudden shaft of light, like a startling thought I had never before absorbed. Yet there was a definite edge of pain, as though I were going to know my father better in death than I had ever known him in life.

Later, while a doctor was verifying death, I was leaning against the wall in the far corner of the room, crying softly. A nurse came over to me and put a comforting arm around me. I couldn't talk through my tears. I wanted to tell her: "I'm not crying because my father is dead. I'm crying because my father never told me that he loved me. Of course, I was expected to know these things. I was expected to know the great part I played in his life and the great part I occupied in his heart, but he never told me." Never once a thank-you.

In all that he has done, the Savior has indicated the importance of thanks. Here are a few short quotations from the scriptures that should be helpful as we give new thought to the importance of vocalizing appreciation.

"He took the cup, and gave thanks" (Matthew 26:27).

"He took the seven loaves and the fishes, and gave thanks" (Matthew 15:36).

"Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things" (D&C 59:7).

"Ye must give thanks unto God in the Spirit for whatsoever blessing ye are blessed with" (D&C 46:32).

"Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, . . . and be ye thankful" (Colossians 3:15).

"Verily I say unto you my friends, fear not, let your hearts be comforted; yea, rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks" (D&C 98:1).

"When thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God" (Alma 37:37).

What a great day it will be in our lives when we can know the blessings of spontaneous gratitude and what it means to us!

Appreciation of companion, appreciation of sweetheart, appreciation of husband and wife, education, and lofty standards is so important. It is a most important ingredient in a happy marriage. Many a family, many a marriage is broken because of a lack of appreciation. The most mature and successful people who participate in marriage are those who understand that a sincere and frequent thank-you is love in one of its most powerful displays. What a strength it is to have a companion who feels and expresses appreciation! Too many times I have heard people say, "My marriage was terminated primarily because my husband (or wife) didn't appreciate anything I ever did for him. No matter what I did, there was no thanks!"

God's love for us was so great that it was possible for him to endure and look upon the sufferings of his Only Begotten Son. We should be eternally grateful that God gave to us his Son, our Savior and Redeemer. Without him and his love and sacrifice, we could never be glorified in his eternal presence. The greatest gift of all, and the one for which we should be most appreciative, is the gift of his Son to us for purposes and realizations that we little comprehend today but should better understand with each passing hour.

How do we show thanks for God's great gifts? How do we show appreciation for the gifts of parents, brothers, sisters, companions, friends, and associates? By a sincere and appropriate thank-you. By our lives, by our works, and by constant words of thanks and a willingness to acknowledge blessings and favors from him and others.

Years ago, when the Olympics were held in Melbourne, Australia, in the spotlight on the winner's platform one day there stood a beautiful, tall, blonde American girl. She was being presented a gold medal, symbolic of first place

in worldwide competition. Tears ran down her cheeks as she accepted the recognition. Many thought she was touched by the victory ceremony; the thing they did not know was the story of her determination, self-discipline, and daily action.

At the age of five she had polio. When the disease left her body, she couldn't use her arms or legs. Her parents took her daily to a swimming pool where they hoped the water would help hold her arms up as she tried to use them again. When she could lift her arms out of the water with her own power, she cried for joy. Next she lifted her legs out of the water. Then her goal was to swim the width of the pool, then the length, then several lengths. She kept on trying, swimming, enduring day after day after day, until she won the gold medal for the butterfly stroke—one of the most difficult of all strokes in swimming—at the Olympics in Melbourne.

What if this champion had not been encouraged at age five to achieve, continue, overcome, and pray? What a tremendous asset were parents who assisted her in the importance of today and now in preparation for all of her tomorrows. Friends said she always took time to give thanks to her mom and dad for constant encouragement. Someone had taught her well to say "thank you."

In recalling some of the Savior's well-known teachings, the word *now* can be appropriately added to emphasize their impact.

John 14:15: "If ye love me, keep my commandments"—NOW.

Mark 16:15: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature"—NOW.

Luke 18:22: "Come, follow me"—NOW.

Truly, if we love God, we will serve him now, and give thanks now.

There are those among us, though they would deny it, who are hungry for fellowship and activity in the Church today. They need us and we need them. It is our duty and blessing to help them find the way now. We and they

are God's sheep, and we can best be fed and led together. Today is the time to let them know we care and that the Lord loves them. He stands anxious to forgive and welcome in the processes of appreciation. God give us the courage to act now. God give us the courage to give thanks.

There is an urgency today for all of us to take time for God. Wise are those who will use God's ways now to insure his eternal companionship tomorrow. The time to become acquainted and know God is today. To achieve true abundance, life must be lived a day at a time in God's companionship.

As we take time for God, we will become more like him. Robert Louis Stevenson once said, "Saints are sinners who kept trying."

It was our Savior Jesus Christ who said, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" (John 8:31).

The message is loud and clear. If we work, serve, and improve now, each hour, each day will lead us onward and upward to a significant tomorrow in his paths. Today is the time for decision. Now is the time for action and gratitude.

Believe me when I tell you God is well pleased when he sees us using our time wisely. With some he is not well pleased because they fear being anxiously engaged in his paths. Some who are willing to listen to the prophet's voice are disappointing to God when they lack

the courage and desire to apply the counsel now, even today. We make a big mistake when we allow ourselves to believe it will be easier to start back tomorrow than to thank God for a new day and a new start.

May I share with you a thank-you that means very much to me. My quorum leader, an esteemed and respected associate, President Howard W. Hunter, has had great difficulty over the past number of years with his mobility. First he was confined to a bed, then a wheelchair, then a walker, and is presently able to stand and walk alone today. He has been a great example of patience, determination, and faith. Over these past few years as Elder Boyd K. Packer and I have sat closest to him in meetings and quorum duties, we help him to his feet after the meetings. Never, and I emphasize the word *never*, have we not heard him say "thank you" when lifted or assisted in his coming and going. I appreciate this lesson. I appreciate his strength.

The use of the words *thank you* is a sign of strength and greatness, not weakness. I have often hoped that young men worldwide in the Boy Scout program as well as learning "do a good turn daily" could have as a worthy companion to it "appreciate a good turn daily."

May God help us to properly adhere to this counsel: "Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things" (D&C 58:7), I pray with gratitude in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.