

A Grateful Heart

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Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. . . . Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.¹

President Samuelson, members of the administration, students, and faculty, I appreciate the opportunity of being with you today. I am especially grateful to have my wife, Sandra, and my family with me today as well.

In the latter part of the 19th century, Johnson Oatman Jr., a Methodist preacher, penned the following words, which we know as the hymn “Count Your Blessings.” I quote from the second verse:

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings; ev'ry doubt will fly,
And you will be singing as the days go by.²*

I know those words are familiar, and I believe you accept them at face value: Counting our blessings and being grateful for them has a positive impact—not just upon our lives but upon the lives of those to whom we

show our gratitude. Remember what Mark Twain said: “I can live for two months on a good compliment.”³

The Study of Gratitude

It now appears that some psychologists have arrived at the same conclusion. Being mindfully grateful for our blessings and expressing gratitude has a strong correlation with increasing our personal happiness and well-being. For example, Dr. Robert Emmons, a professor at the University of California, Davis, and one of the leading scholars in the scientific study of gratitude, said the following:

It is possible that psychology has ignored gratitude because it appears, on the surface, to be a very obvious emotion, lacking in interesting complications: we receive a gift—from friends, from family, from God—and then we feel pleasurablely grateful. But while the emotion seemed simplistic even to me as I began my research, I soon discovered that gratitude is a deeper, more complex phenomenon that plays a critical role in human happiness. Gratitude is

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*literally one of the few things that can measurably change people's lives.*⁴

Dr. Emmons and his colleagues found scientific proof that people who practice gratitude through activities such as keeping a gratitude journal are more loving, forgiving, and optimistic about the future. They exercise more frequently, report fewer illnesses, and generally feel better about their lives.⁵

For example, in a ten-week study Dr. Emmons randomly assigned participants into one of three groups. One group of participants was encouraged to briefly record five things they were grateful for each week; a second group was asked to describe five hassles or negative events that had happened to them each week; and the third group was simply asked to list five events, but they were not told to emphasize the positive or the negative. Before each participant wrote about their blessings or hassles, they completed a daily journal in which they rated their moods, their physical health, and their overall well-being. The moods they rated included feelings like distress, excitement, sadness, stress, and happiness, while their physical health included ratings such as headaches, sore muscles, stomach pain, nausea, coughing, sore throat, and poor appetite. The participants also rated how they felt about their lives, selecting from descriptions ranging from terrible to delighted.

The results of the ten-week study are impressive for the gratitude group. The gratitude participants felt better about their lives and were more optimistic about the future than people in the other two groups. The gratitude group also reported fewer health concerns, like headaches, and spent significantly more time exercising than people in the other two groups. According to the scale Dr. Emmons used to calculate well-being, the people in the gratitude group were a full 25 percent happier than the participants in the hassles or neutral groups.⁶

In subsequent studies Dr. Emmons also reported that people who regularly kept a gratitude journal and were in the habit of recognizing and expressing gratitude for their blessings reported feeling closer and more connected to people, had better relationships, were more likely to help others, felt less lonely, felt less depressed, slept better, and were more pleasant to be around.⁷

Another psychologist, Dr. Jeffrey Froh, summarized the practice of gratitude in this way:

*As gratitude involves wanting what one has rather than having what one wants, instilling a sense of gratitude may help people appreciate the gifts of the moment and experience freedom from past regrets and future anxieties.*⁸

Indeed, over the past decade there has been a growing body of scientific literature linking the practice of consistent or “chronic” gratitude with a host of positive outcomes for our lives. Said one researcher, “The practice of gratitude is incompatible with negative emotions and may actually diminish or deter such feelings as anger, bitterness, and greed.”⁹ It is little wonder, then, that both ancient and modern philosophers recognized the value of gratitude—from the Roman philosopher Cicero, who stated that gratitude is “not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others”¹⁰ to David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk who penned these beautiful words: “The root of joy is gratefulness. . . . It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.”¹¹

God's Constitution of Gratitude

I appreciate the academic contribution to our understanding of gratitude and its impact on our well-being. I also know that the scriptures and the words of prophets and apostles, both ancient and modern, teach us a great deal about gratitude and the need to cultivate a grateful heart. Through studying “the doctrine of gratitude” we can be instructed and

motivated to develop a “gratitude attitude” in our lives. Remember Mormon’s commentary regarding Alma’s mission to the Zoramites:

And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God.¹²

What, then, is the virtue of the word of God as it relates to gratitude? Given our time today, I would like to look at three scriptures (and a few supportive passages) that I believe form a central part of what I would like to call “God’s Constitution of Gratitude.”

Rendering Our Heartfelt Thanksgiving

My first scripture: Psalm 24:1–2:

The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.

For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.

In a similar statement, the Psalmist also wrote, “The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine: as for the world and the fulness thereof, thou hast founded them.”¹³

The earth and all of its creations—everything—belong to God. He has ownership and blesses us with His possessions—even the gift of life. Yet, I sometimes feel a sense of entitlement and find myself thinking about what I created, what I purchased, and what I own: property, car, food, clothing, and my health. But, in reality, brothers and sisters, I have created nothing; I own nothing. As the Psalmist proclaimed, the rightful owner is Heavenly Father—He who graciously bestows His creations (including the air I breathe) for me to use in the short season I am here in mortality. That

kind of heavenly, divine benevolence deserves our highest gratitude and praise!

King Benjamin clearly understood this principle of God’s ownership and our indebtedness to Him, as he so beautifully explained in the Book of Mormon:

And now, in the first place, he hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him.

And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast?

And now I ask, can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay. Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you.¹⁴

King Benjamin also said (and I’m paraphrasing) that if we were to muster up all of the thanks and praise we could possibly give, that would still be insufficient, given the multitude of blessings we receive from God.¹⁵ King Benjamin was not saying, “Well, you can’t possibly thank God for what He has given you, so why even try?” On the contrary, I believe he was saying that we ought to do our very best in thanking God and rendering our heartfelt thanksgiving to Him every day of our lives. In relation to this, I like what President Joseph F. Smith said:

The grateful man sees so much in the world to be thankful for, and with him the good outweighs the evil. Love overpowers jealousy, and light drives darkness out of his life. Pride destroys our gratitude and sets up selfishness in its place. How much happier we are in the presence of a grateful and loving soul, and how careful we should be to cultivate, through the medium of a prayerful life, a thankful attitude toward God and man!¹⁶

Grateful People Are Happier People

My second scripture: Doctrine and Covenants 59:7, 21:

Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things. . . .

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.

Does God need our thankful hearts and praise? Is Heavenly Father dependent upon our gratitude? Do our thankful prayers make God holier, wiser, or more omniscient? Absolutely not. Why, then, is it a commandment to be thankful in all things and acknowledge God's hand in our lives? I believe Joseph Smith gave us the answer to that question when he stated:

As God has designed our happiness—and the happiness of all His creatures, He never has—He never will institute an ordinance or give a commandment to His people that is not calculated in its nature to promote that happiness which He has designed.¹⁷

In short, we are commanded to thank God in all things because it promotes our happiness and well-being. Grateful people are happier people. If that were not the case, God would not command us to express our thanks to Him and to others. He loves us and desires our happiness, and He knows that expressions of gratitude to Him and to those around us will bring positive changes to our lives. As our Father, that pleases Him.

President Thomas S. Monson understands the connection between gratitude and happiness and often speaks about this topic. In a recent conference address he stated, "Sincerely giving thanks not only helps us recognize our blessings, but it also unlocks the doors of heaven and helps us feel God's love."¹⁸ President Monson also said that "to express gratitude is gracious and honorable, to enact

gratitude is generous and noble, but to live with gratitude ever in our hearts is to touch heaven."¹⁹ I love President Monson's choice of words: Gratitude "unlocks the doors of heaven" and "to live with gratitude ever in our hearts is to touch heaven." As I have tried to live with a more grateful heart, I have felt the divine, experienced God's love, and been humbled.

I have also witnessed and felt gratitude's heavenly touch through other people, like an elderly Catholic nun my wife and I met in the city of Bethlehem. From 2007 to 2009 my wife and I had the privilege of working and teaching at the BYU Jerusalem Center. During that time we met a host of wonderful people (Christians, Muslims, and Jews) who influenced our lives in profound ways. On one occasion we were invited by one of the Jerusalem Center service couples—who oversaw the Church's humanitarian program in the Holy Land—to visit an orphanage in Bethlehem. The purpose of their visit was to determine needs and the appropriate assistance from the Church.

The orphanage was located in a residential neighborhood in Bethlehem near the Church of the Nativity. As we entered the building, the first sounds I heard were those of little children. We passed several rooms filled with small beds and noticed newborn infants lying in cribs and small children playing with one another. I also noticed a shortage of adult staff compared with the number of children I could see.

Our meeting was with the director of the orphanage—one of the most impressive people I have met in my Middle East travels: a diminutive, elderly, Catholic nun from France. Though small in stature, she was large in heart and spirit. As we visited with her we learned about the history of the orphanage, the number of children cared for, and the challenges of feeding and clothing so many precious children. There was no doubt the orphanage had

its challenges. I noticed, however, that as she described the needs of the children and the problem of the shortage of staff and materials, there was not one word of complaint. Her speech was often punctuated with “Thanks be to God; thanks be to God.”

After the humanitarian couple had assessed needs, they asked this little nun if the orphanage could use supplies like powdered milk, newborn kits, and other necessities for older children. She excitedly replied, “Anything will help us; anything will help us.” As arrangements were being made for shipping and delivery of the needed goods, she sat quietly in front of us with hands clasped, as though she were in the act of praying, and repeated the words “thank you, thank you, thank you.” Her gratitude was real and heartfelt. Her expressions of thankfulness touched me deeply, and I often think of this experience when I want to relive a moment when I saw gratitude’s divine nature. Her example of a grateful heart amplified the words of the Psalmist when he declared, “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.”²⁰

Counting Your Blessings—Even in Adversity

My third scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18:

Rejoice evermore.

Pray without ceasing.

In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Do you wonder what God would like you to be doing every day? The Apostle Paul declared that it is to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks in everything. Paul’s writings are filled with admonitions to be grateful, to give thanks, and to live in thankfulness. His counsel encouraging us to be more thankful is especially inspiring when you stop to consider that he was a Church leader who was scourged (receiving thirty-nine lashes); beaten with rods; left for

dead after being stoned by his countrymen; shipwrecked three times—spending one night and a day in the water; bitten by a deadly snake; betrayed by those he thought were his friends; and falsely imprisoned and who suffered weariness, hunger, thirst, and cold and was in peril of robbers.²¹ And I’ve been depressed over losing two football games!

I believe Paul’s statement that we should “in every thing give thanks” is his counsel to recognize our blessings and practice gratitude in the worst of times—even in adversity. Yet you and I know that finding and counting our blessings during challenging times can be difficult. As someone once said, “The hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings.”²² The gratitude math can sometimes be difficult when life assaults us with unexpected hardships and trials. Life’s challenges—some serious, some less so—are common to all of us. In those challenging times when there does not seem to be much to be grateful for, President Monson has wisely counseled us:

Our realization of what is most important in life goes hand in hand with gratitude for our blessings.

Said one well-known author: “Both abundance and lack [of abundance] exist simultaneously in our lives, as parallel realities. It is always our conscious choice which secret garden we will tend . . . when we choose not to focus on what is missing from our lives but are grateful for the abundance that’s present—love, health, family, friends, work, the joys of nature, and personal pursuits that bring us [happiness]—the wasteland of illusion falls away and we experience heaven on earth.”²³

Studies have shown that focusing on the negative in times of adversity—using derogatory or critical words as we talk to ourselves or others—can darken our mood and, much like a virus, infect the moods of those we interact with. Consciously choosing to fill our minds

with thoughts of our blessings and feeling appreciation for those blessings can change the way we feel and brighten our spirits during difficult times. Even spending a few minutes thinking about our blessings—even numbering them—as we walk from class to class can add a little sunshine and encouragement to our lives. It’s so simple, yet so powerful.

Increasing Our Gratitude

What, then, are some of the ways we can recognize our blessings, increase our thankfulness, and practice gratitude? Briefly, I would like to suggest five:

1. Try Keeping a Gratitude Journal

Think of three to five blessings you have experienced throughout the day or the week and record them in a gratitude journal. Look for blessings from the mundane to the magnificent. Before writing in his gratitude journal, President Henry B. Eyring pondered the following question: “Have I seen the hand of God reaching out to touch us or our children or our family today?”²⁴ As he faithfully kept his gratitude journal, President Eyring said:

*Something began to happen. As I would cast my mind over the day, I would see evidence of what God had done for one of us that I had not recognized in the busy moments of the day. As that happened, and it happened often, I realized that trying to remember had allowed God to show me what He had done.*²⁵

Remember, looking for our blessings will help us focus on what we have rather than on what we do not have. As the Greek philosopher Epictetus reminded us, “He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.”²⁶

2. Add More Thank-Yous to Your Vocabulary

Saying “thank you” to someone brightens your day by affirming your positive feelings.

It also lifts the spirits of those who are deserving of your thankfulness.

3. Take Time to Write Thank-You Notes and Letters of Appreciation to People Who Have Blessed Your Life

John Kralik, an attorney with a struggling law practice and personal family problems, determined to reverse the cycle of negative thinking through writing and sending one thank-you note each day of the year—365 thank-you notes in total. His note-writing endeavor taught him a valuable lesson: blessings can be easily overlooked unless we are consciously thinking about them each day.²⁷ To that end, note writing helps us identify, remember, and express our blessings.

4. Live in the Present Moment and Try to Give Thanks for Small Blessings Encountered Every Day of Your Life

As busy students, it is easy to get caught up in the tomorrow: next week’s exam, next week’s project, the paper due next Tuesday, the upcoming holidays. And while it’s healthy to plan and prepare for future events, if you are too consumed with the tomorrows, there is a chance that you will miss something small and wonderful that is happening to you in the present moment. David Steindl-Rast posed this question: “Are we thankful or are we grateful? . . . Could it be that the mystic gratefulness in the depth of every human heart sings with ‘a still, small voice,’ and is easily drowned out by the noise we endure and the noise we make?”²⁸ Sometimes living in the future can produce just enough noise to miss the still, small voice of gratitude we could find in the present moment.

A short illustration: A few weeks ago I was waiting in the Chicago O’Hare Airport for a connecting flight to Salt Lake City with two of my colleagues: Blake Boatright and Vance Theodore. As we were seated near our gate, reading and relaxing before the last leg of our

journey, I was interrupted by a rather enthusiastic black Labrador dog sniffing around my briefcase and other belongings I had on the floor. A police officer was standing nearby, and I immediately recognized the dog as a “sniffer” dog looking for drugs or the residue of explosive materials. While the dog moved rapidly from person to person, sniffing purses and carry-ons, it returned to my briefcase for a second check. After a few sniffs and what seemed like 100 wags of its tail, the dog and the police officer disappeared. A short time later, a second sniffer dog stopped by our gate to check things out as well.

Now, I could have dismissed the experience and continued to focus on my reading or think about needed preparations for the following week in school. Instead, my mind turned to the present moment, and I began to think about the two dogs and their training. They were there to make sure everything was in good order. They were there to ensure my safety and the safety of others who would be flying that day. After contemplating this, I quietly expressed thanks to Heavenly Father for trainers and dogs with wildly wagging tails who were there to bless my life. As mundane as that might sound to you, it was an enriching feeling—one that I have thought of frequently. Look for blessings in the now or the present moments of your life.

5. Thoughtful Prayer

Prayer awakens our grateful heart. Forgetfulness is an obstacle to being grateful while “awareness is a precondition” to having a grateful heart.²⁹ Our personal prayers provide us with sacred time to ponder our blessings and express gratitude to Heavenly Father. As we thank Him daily, our gratitude should be centered on God’s greatest gift to us: the gift of His Beloved Son, who ransomed us through the shedding of His blood.

Brothers and sisters, gratitude is a heavenly, spiritual gift and a spiritual force in our lives.

May we have hearts that can feel, ears that can hear, and eyes that can see our blessings and live in continual gratitude toward God and those around us is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Melody Beattie, *The Language of Letting Go: Daily Meditations on Codependency* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1990), 218.
2. Johnson Oatman Jr., “Count Your Blessings,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 241.
3. Quoted in Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography: The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Langhorne Clemens*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), 1334.
4. Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 2.
5. See Emmons, *Thanks!* 11.
6. See Emmons, *Thanks!* 27–30.
7. See Emmons, *Thanks!* 44.
8. Jeffrey J. Froh, Robert A. Emmons, Noel A. Card, Giacomo Bono, and Jennifer A. Wilson, “Gratitude and the Reduced Costs of Materialism in Adolescents,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 2011), 300.
9. Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 95.
10. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Plancio*, 54 B.C.; quoted in Joseph B. Wirthlin, “Live in Thanksgiving Daily,” 31 October 2000, BYU devotional address.
11. David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1984), 204.
12. Alma 31:5.
13. Psalm 89:11.
14. Mosiah 2:23–25.
15. See Mosiah 2:20–21.
16. *GD*, 263.
17. *Teachings*, 256.
18. Thomas S. Monson, “The Divine Gift of Gratitude,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 87.

19. Monson, "The Divine Gift," 90.
20. Psalm 106:1.
21. See 2 Corinthians 11:24–27.
22. Eric Hoffer, reflection 172 in *Reflections on the Human Condition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 94.
23. Thomas S. Monson, "Finding Joy in the Journey," *Ensign*, November 2008, 86; quoting Sarah Ban Breathnach, *The Simple Abundance Journal of Gratitude* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 83; quoted in John Cook, comp., *The Book of Positive Quotations*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fairview Press, 2007), 342.
24. Henry B. Eyring, "O Remember, Remember," *Ensign*, November 2007, 67.
25. Eyring, "O Remember," 67.
26. *The Discourses of Epictetus; with the Encheiridion and Fragments*, trans. George Long (London: George Bell and Sons, 1888), 429; quoted in Monson, "The Divine Gift," 88.
27. See John Kralik, *365 Thank-Yous: The Year a Simple Act of Daily Gratitude Changed My Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2010).
28. David Steindl-Rast, "Are You Thankful or Are You Grateful?"; gratefulness.org/readings/dsr_areyou.htm. The original essay commissioned by Beliefnet in November 2000 for Thanksgiving was titled "Life Is a Gift"; see page 3 of beliefnet.com/Wellness/2000/11/Life-Is-A-Gift.aspx?p=1.
29. Emmons, *Thanks!* 199.