

Overcoming Ingratitude

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There is a story, probably apocryphal, of an aging widow who eked out a meager living by selling soft pretzels on a busy city street corner for fifty cents apiece. Each morning a businessman passed her corner on his way to work. He had no taste for pretzels, but he wanted to help the person who sold them, so each morning he would give her the fifty cents and not take a pretzel.

One morning, after the man had performed the daily ritual and was walking away, the woman called him back. He said, “I know. You’re wondering why it is that I never take my pretzel.” She replied, “I couldn’t care less about that. I just want you to know that the price has gone up to seventy-five cents.”

In the mid-1970s I was the head of the Civil Division of the United States Department of Justice. Together with about three hundred other lawyers, we handled the broad range of civil law suits brought either by, or more frequently against, the United States. One of the issues with which we dealt was the nationwide effort in the fall of 1976 to provide a vaccine against what most experts predicted would be a severe epidemic of swine flu that would affect the country during the ensuing winter. The government’s medical experts predicted

that millions would benefit from the vaccine, but they also predicted that with virtual certainty there would be a handful of people who would become quite ill, and some might even die—not from the flu, but from the vaccine. Some of these people would certainly sue the government, and past experience indicated that the resulting judgments might be substantial in amount. For these reasons there was a large debate within the government as to whether the predictable assistance to millions of people was justified in light of the large amounts that the government might have to pay in damage judgments.

During the course of one of those deliberations, I expressed to my governmental colleagues the following thought: “This problem exists only because of the government’s humanitarian effort to save possibly millions of its citizens from serious illness and, in some cases, death. The United States of America is under no obligation to supply this vaccine. And yet we are anticipating an apparently predictable consequence in which some of the

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very people we are trying to help will turn around and sue us because of our Good Samaritan generosity.” And then I asked the question that caused such amazement among the dozen or so other participants at that meeting: “Wouldn’t you think that someone in this fair land of ours, maybe even one who had an adverse reaction to the vaccination, would say, ‘You know, I really appreciate what the government is doing for me, looking out for my health, and going to great and unrequired effort and expense to help me and many others cut down our chances of sickness or death?’ In short, I asked, “Shouldn’t somebody be saying, ‘Thank you for doing your best,’ rather than, ‘This better work or I’ll see you in court?’”

I will never forget my colleagues’ responses to those questions. They ranged from facial expressions reflecting unmistakable incredulity to verbal utterances, including such words as “naïveté,” “lack of sophistication,” and “that’s what you get when you take some kid from the Rocky Mountains and ask him to handle the government’s litigation.”

The common feature of these two stories, of course, is gratitude or, perhaps more accurately, lack of gratitude. Today I want to share some thoughts concerning why gratitude is so important, why it is so neglected among all segments of society, including, regrettably, those of us who are members of the LDS Church, and whether there are any positive steps we can take to enhance our consciousness and our practice of this particular virtue.

There can be no doubt that gratitude is one of the great human accomplishments and ingratitude one of the great human failings. Scriptures, both ancient and modern, are very clear on this subject. President Benson tells us, “The Prophet Joseph is reported to have said at one time that one of the greatest sins for which the Latter-day Saints would be guilty would be the sin of ingratitude” (*TETB*, p. 363). Similarly, President Hinckley has observed that, “Absence of gratitude is the mark of the narrow,

uneducated mind. It bespeaks a lack of knowledge and the ignorance of self-sufficiency” (*CR*, October 1964, p. 117). The Psalmist, in Psalm 100, put the basic proposition with characteristic simplicity and beauty: “Know ye that the Lord he is God: . . . be thankful unto him, and bless his name” (verses 3–4). And in more modern times, the Lord revealed the same truth to Joseph Smith: “And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious” (*D&C* 78:19).

In short, it is not open to any serious doubt that, as President Romney said in general conference about eleven years ago: “The virtues of gratitude have been widely extolled and the sinfulness of ingratitude has been just as widely condemned” (“Gratitude and Thanksgiving,” *Ensign*, November 1982, p. 49).

Let me tell you of two of our students from whom over the past year I have learned important lessons about gratitude. They are both members of our men’s basketball team, John Fish and Shawn Lindquist. In the past fifteen months neither of them has had as much playing time as he would have liked. At different times I asked each of them how he handled this challenge emotionally, and the responses I received were in each case a personal learning experience for me.

What John Fish told me, just prior to the Maui Classic a year ago, was, “Of course I’d like to be playing more. But I’ve concluded that if my role is to add depth and to provide playing minutes when the team needs me for that purpose, I’d rather do that as a member of a good basketball team, which this one certainly is.”

Shawn’s response was, “I’m just grateful to be in a BYU uniform and contributing when I can and what I can. When the team needs me, whether in practice or in a game, I’m there.”

What a wonderful lesson from two very talented basketball players whose reaction could have been one of resentment. Instead, it was one of gratitude.

The most common English phrase we use to express our gratitude is a simple “Thank you.” I’ve long been fascinated by the fact that the Spanish word for *thank you* also has another, quite separate, meaning. The word is *gracias*, as I suspect most of you know. But the word *gracias* is also the plural of the noun *grace*, and therefore implies a full range of virtues and characteristics related to human decency and kindnesses, including courtesy, civility, and genuine concern for other people. The fact that the Spanish word that is used as the basic expression of gratitude is also a noun that embraces generally those qualities of civility and kindness is surely pure coincidence. But it is also a convenient—even if coincidental—reminder of the breadth of human virtues that we develop when we practice gratitude.

Gratitude also involves more, however, than simple human kindness and courtesy. Righteousness itself is involved. In describing to Timothy the signs of human deterioration that would characterize the last days, Paul predicted that people would become “unthankful, unholy” (2 Timothy 3:2)—implying, I believe, that there is a direct link between unthankfulness and unholiness and, conversely, therefore, between thankfulness and holiness.

The most important question is, of course, how can we progress from theory to practice? What can we do to get ourselves beyond simply observing that gratitude is such a good thing and ingratitude such a bad thing? How do we move to the next step of actually doing something about it and adding gratitude to the list of virtues that we practice in fact? Thereby making ourselves better, total people—more thankful, and therefore more holy.

Each of the two steps is fairly simple. Part of the problem is simply one of recognition. That is, it is not so much that we practice ingratitude as a deliberate vice—as one might offend either the Word of Wisdom or principles of sexual morality because he or she chooses to do so for pleasure—but rather that we overlook

and bypass positive opportunities to practice gratitude as an affirmative and consistent part of what we are. My favorite example of ingratitude—and one which demonstrates that inadvertence is probably one of its root causes—involves the ten lepers whom the Savior healed. Luke reports:

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God,

And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan.

And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?

There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. [Luke 17:15–18]

You know something? I think that report by Luke, of only one leper out of ten who even bothered to come back and say thank you, may be a fair statistical measure of what we might call the human gratitude index—not only 2,000 years ago, but today as well. Indeed, in today’s world, ten percent would probably be an overly optimistic estimate.

I believe the first hurdle, therefore, is to conquer simple inadvertence. We are just not as aware as we ought to be. We need to make a conscious effort, because there are people for whom we should be grateful and there are opportunities all around us to express that gratitude. A simple awareness of those people and those circumstances will not come easily or naturally, as the story of the ten lepers illustrates. But we can work at it, and, like all worthwhile things, we will be happier and better people if we will make the effort.

Conquering inadvertence—making ourselves aware of the problem—is not the complete solution to overcoming ingratitude. It gets us partway there by bringing us to an inward consciousness of the debt of gratitude we owe to others. But there is, I believe, also another element. Gratitude should be not only

felt inwardly but also expressed outwardly. And for most of us, for some reason, even those of us who express ourselves rather liberally on most subjects, expressing ourselves on this one is uncommonly difficult. This reality was illustrated very well by my colleague Dee Andersen in a Thanksgiving devotional address he delivered in this building in 1985. He reported that at a time when he worked at the Church Office Building in Salt Lake, he frequently found himself arriving at the parking lot at about the same time with another individual, whom he had admired for many years but to whom he had never been able to express his feelings of admiration and gratitude. In Brother Andersen's words, "Each time we entered the building and climbed onto the elevator together, I found myself tongue-tied. I could hardly stammer, 'Good morning,' much less, 'Oh, how I admire you,' or 'Thank you for all you have done and are doing for me.'" Finally, Brother Andersen, in his words, "took a pen in hand and in longhand wrote a short note that expressed [my] feelings."

A few days later, he received the following response:

Dear Dee,

That was one of the sweetest notes I have ever received, and I appreciate hearing from you. I am indeed grateful to be so close to you, and I hope that we may see each other once in a while. May the Lord bless you and assist you in all your efforts. With kindest wishes. Faithfully yours . . .

And whose signature was at the bottom of that note? We all recognize the name: Spencer W. Kimball. Dee concludes: "Oh, how President Kimball blessed my life because I took the time and had the courage to say thank you" ("Thanks-Living," *BYU 1985–86 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1986], pp. 48–49).

These, then, are the two steps that I offer as a formula for adding the noble virtue of

gratitude to our individual inventory of personal moral strengths: First we recognize the problem, and then we take affirmative steps to do something about it. Each step is simple to state and, at an abstract level, to understand. But as experiences from the days of the ten lepers down to Dee Andersen's time demonstrate, neither is easy to accomplish.

In conclusion, then, let me begin personally, right now, to practice what I have today been preaching and express a few things for which I am grateful.

1. I am grateful for the Restoration. I am grateful for prophets, for revelation, for the priesthood, for the Book of Mormon, and for the fact that I have been privileged to have come to earth during a time when the gospel and its plan for living are here in their fullness.

2. I am thankful for my family. With each passing year I grow more aware of just how important they are to me. Let me tell you of something that happened just a few weeks ago. It was a Sunday afternoon, and following dinner, instead of reading the scriptures in the usual way, we went around the table and from the oldest to the youngest asked each one to read his or her favorite scripture and make a brief comment as to why it was a favorite. It was a rather ordinary experience, and yet, as I listened to each of them, my gratitude intensified for family members who understand the scriptures and are committed to the eternal principles for which they stand. Nothing in this world, I think, brings quite the same joy as do loving family members who share common values and common devotion.

3. I am grateful for Brigham Young University. I appreciate the superb undergraduate preparation that I received here as a student—preparation for law school and preparation for life—in an atmosphere that builds great faith at the same time it stimulates the mind. I am grateful to the faithful tithe payers around the world whose contributions provide for about seventy percent of the cost of

this unique education. Among my list of things for which I am grateful, this one is easy to overlook, and so I deliberately remind myself of it from time to time. I am also grateful for the students of your generation, for each of you, individually, and for some of your groups.

4. I am grateful for the loyalty, the competence, the encouragement, and the love that I enjoy from my professional colleagues at BYU, including the members of the President's Council, the broader administration, the faculty and staff, and my two colleagues with whom I work on a daily basis, Janet Calder and Jan Nelson. I am grateful that in my present employment, as in none other I have had, my wife Janet is also a professional colleague in many significant ways. In addition to the enjoyable aspects of that fact, she is, quite simply, very good at what she does—all the way from giving devotional talks to raising money to formulating and implementing new ideas to serving on committees and hosting. And for that competence and that devotion I am also grateful.

5. I am grateful for little things like food and water and clothes and a warm house, and the fact that unlike so many people in the world, and also unlike some of my ancestors, I have never been deprived of any of these. I am grateful that for fifty-five years there was no damage to the nerves in my legs, and I was privileged to participate in the many joys that healthy legs can bring. I am also grateful for life itself, for the fact that being relegated now to walking rather than running appears to be my most serious health challenge.

Brothers and sisters, the business of BYU is education. We have come here to learn. The education for which we strive here reaches a broader range of learning than at other universities. Let me challenge each of us to make a conscious effort to include within that broader range of things to be learned at BYU an increase in our determination to practice gratitude, to enhance our appreciation for other people and for abundant blessings. May we deliberately strive to be more like Dee Andersen on the day he wrote that note to President Kimball, more like the one leper who came back to say "thank you," less like the nine who did not, and less like the pretzel merchant whose only response was that the price had gone up for pretzels she did not supply.

It will not be easy. Quite simply, for most of us gratitude is not something that develops naturally, without effort. But as prophets both ancient and modern have reminded us, expenditure of that effort is worthwhile, because we are dealing with one of the most important of all human virtues and one of the most common of all human deficiencies. Moreover, as Paul reminded Timothy, gratitude is tantamount to holiness. This means that when we enlarge our capacity for gratitude, we are also enriching our entire souls. Be conscious of people and circumstances all around you—family members, roommates, professors, classmates, and others who are really deserving of your gratitude—and then buck up your courage enough to tell them how you feel. That we may extend that positive effort is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.