

Free-Riding and Gratitude

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It is common for faculty who occupy this pulpit to integrate insights obtained from their academic disciplines into their devotional talks. However, I am at a distinct disadvantage: I am an economist. In spite of these trepidations, I will on occasion resort to personal experiences and observations, a few of which are colored by my chosen academic field. However, you shouldn't expect much. An old joke goes like this: "There are three kinds of economists: those who can count and those who can't." I feel that way sometimes, but today I am actually going to talk in a general way about counting.

It seems that many of the most important experiences in life are very subtle and inward. The Apostle Paul said: "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). Love, for all of its power and importance in our lives, is most difficult to describe. Perhaps I am not the only husband who gets a glimpse of God's grace when I look into the eyes of my dear wife and exclaim, "How could this wonderful thing have happened to such as I?" Love does not lend itself well to direct observation, but it is revealed and nourished in many subtle ways. For those of us who have embraced the great plan of

happiness, we know that the love of God and of man is the ultimate distillation of that great plan. It is of one of these very subtle manifestations of and strengthenings of love that I wish to talk about today: gratitude, both as a spiritual feeling and as an ensuing expression.

Some months ago I was driving somewhere with my son Cameron. Cameron is 11 years old, and he likes to talk. In spite of wonderful Mormon ads on parental listening, unfortunately I am often more aware that Cameron is talking than I actually understand what he is saying. As I tried to refocus on what he was saying, he mentioned a name. I asked, "Who is that?" He replied with considerable emphasis and surprise, "He is my Primary teacher." I felt that I was thankful for this man's help in teaching my son, yet I hadn't revealed it by my behavior. How easy it would have been to have previously asked my son about his Primary class and learned his teacher's name. I clearly failed the implicit quiz given to me by my son.

It is not always immediately apparent to us or to others what is in our hearts. There can be insensitivities even when our hearts are in

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the right place, not to mention those that are truly born of ingratitude. Neither are particularly pretty. As I reflected on which of these was correct regarding Cameron's teacher, my mind was drawn to an experience that looms large in my early married life. When I was in graduate school, my wife, Sue, was in a fairly serious car accident. A young man stole his aunt's car and drove it through a red light, hitting my wife and our two small daughters in our Volkswagen bug. My wife can verify that I was a little too anxious, after hearing that they were all well, to move on to inquire about the condition of the car, which was only a few years old. As it turned out, it was totaled.

Those who know me well are probably amused or even a little concerned at hearing this story, because I have always been a bit too captivated by machinery. Perhaps this is a legacy of my rural heritage. However, this experience gave me a vivid insight: one can build relationships by expressing love and gratitude or one can diminish them by silence or by expressing ingratitude.

Reflecting on both of these incidents caused me to evaluate my own sensitivities to the gracious service of others and how I valued it. More important, was I aware and grateful for the blessings given to me by God? I wondered whether it is enough to feel gratitude but not express it. Or is gratitude too abstract and impotent if it is not expressed? Because gratitude is a feeling of thankful appreciation for favors or benefits received, my mind was drawn to a principle in economics called "free-riding," which is simply the possibility that self-interested individuals can on occasion receive a benefit from consuming a good or service without paying a commensurate cost. This phrase arose during the 19th century in the vicinity of Dodge City, when ranchers who didn't ride with the community posse received the benefits of others catching the rustlers (see Heinz Kohler, *Intermediate Microeconomics*, 2nd ed. [Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1986],

561). Free-riding in economics arises when it is very costly to exclude a person from receiving a benefit such as national defense. Free riders consume the benefits but rely on others to bear the cost of producing the goods or services. I mused whether I wasn't in a sense guilty of free-riding in my relationships to God and to my family, in the community of Saints and elsewhere, when I didn't feel or express a proper sense of gratitude for favors, services, or benefits received.

Perhaps one of the more prominent and familiar events in the Savior's life is one devoted to gratitude, as found in Luke 17:

And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee.

And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off:

And they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go shew yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed.

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.

And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole. [Luke 17:11–19]

Leprosy, a dreaded and deadly disease, was cured by the Savior in these 10 men when they asked to be cleansed. The Savior asked them to do the customary showing of themselves to the priest to verify that they were cleansed. One returned upon being cleansed to give thanks. This was not a perfunctory thank you. He fell down on his face at the Savior's feet and glorified God. We are not told much about the other

nine, but the fact that they didn't return to give thanks seems to have displeased Jesus, and hence His question: "But where are the nine?" They appear to have been free riders. They received a wonderful benefit at their own request, and yet they were not willing to bear the simple cost of thanking the Savior or His Father. They might have been very thankful in their hearts. They might have said, "The Lord knows my heart; there is no need to express thanks." Any rational explanation for their behavior does not alter the fact that Jesus makes it clear that more was expected of them.

We can surmise more about the Samaritan who returned. We might have expected that he had less understanding of God than did the Jews, in a doctrinal sense, but this one Samaritan clearly had great spiritual understanding. He knew the great blessing that had been given to him, and he knew the source of it. And he likely not only wanted to give thanks but wanted to commune with the Savior. Though he was called a stranger in the usual sense of that word, he was no stranger to God. Through his faith and gratitude, he not only was cleansed of his physical ailments, but it seems very likely that he was made whole in a larger sense.

I draw two conclusions from this historical event. First, *having faith in and acknowledging God and His goodness is required for us to be spiritually whole*. For our own spiritual success and joy we must feel of His goodness and love, and thus we are motivated to offer a grateful heart. Gratitude and the expression of gratitude are the natural offspring of our love for our Father in Heaven, of our following the first great commandment. The fruits of a thankful heart were explained clearly by President Hinckley:

*Gratitude is of the very essence of worship. . . .
 . . . When you walk with gratitude, you do not walk with arrogance and conceit and egotism, you walk with a spirit of thanksgiving that is becoming to you and will bless your lives. [TGBH, 250]*

Genuinely feeling and expressing that gratitude, whether difficult or easy, is a minimal expected cost or effort from those blessed. The expression of gratitude means that we recognize the value of what we have received and we are willing to bear a small cost to reveal this to God. Perhaps this is why some mistakenly say, "Gratitude is the least of virtues, but ingratitude is the worst of vices" (Thomas Fuller, *Gnomologia* [1732], no. 1749). The expression of gratitude provides a more lasting impression—and thus perspective—to our own souls. I can attest that a valuable lesson learned by all teachers is that utterance brings focus, understanding, and greater life to a concept. Similarly, a testimony or grateful prayer professed is more purifying and powerful to the person speaking than those thoughts that are merely felt.

This leads me to the second conclusion from the events in Luke: *It is particularly offensive when we are given much and remain insensitive to God's goodness*. Perhaps free-riding is an apt term for such behavior. Indeed, isn't this what we would call rude or offensive behavior in other settings? Let me read from section 59 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

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. [D&C 59:7, 21]

And Elder Maxwell said:

*[God] experiences a deep, divine disappointment in us when we are ungrateful and when we are unwilling to confess God's hand in all things. (D&C 59:21.) But it is because of what our sustained ingratitude does to us, not to Him. [Neal A. Maxwell, *Sermons Not Spoken* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 85]*

Like the nine, I have found that it is not always easy in my life to recognize, remember, and acknowledge His blessings. It can be difficult in the day-to-day routine, and it can even be difficult in momentous times, such as those of great stress. In difficult times, often optimism disappears, and found in its place is despair, anger, self-pity, and even self-loathing. In this setting it often requires real and purposeful effort to feel hope and gratitude. Yet we surely lack perspective if we do not.

A wonderfully instructive story of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to lift mankind is found in *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom. You might recall that Corrie and her sister Betsie were Dutch Christians hiding Jews during World War II. They were caught and taken to a German concentration camp, where they were moved to dreadful flea-infested barracks in a place called Ravensbruck. In the depths of this human tragedy, some very profound truths emerged. In Corrie's retelling of the story, she asked her sister,

"Betsie, how can we live in such a place!"

"Show us. Show us how." It was said so matter of factly it took me a second to realize she was praying. More and more the distinction between prayer and the rest of life seemed to be vanishing for Betsie.

"Corrie!" she said excitedly. "He's given us the answer! Before we asked, as He always does! In the Bible this morning. Where was it? Read that part again!"

I glanced down the long dim aisle to make sure no guard was in sight, then drew the Bible from its pouch. "It was in First Thessalonians," I said. We were on our third complete reading of the New Testament since leaving Scheveningen. In the feeble light I turned the pages. "Here it is: 'Comfort the frightened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. . . .'" It seemed written expressly to Ravensbruck.

"Go on," said Betsie. "That wasn't all."

"Oh yes: '. . . to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus—'"

"That's it, Corrie! That's His answer. 'Give thanks in all circumstances!' That's what we can do. We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new barracks!"

I stared at her, then around me at the dark, foul-aired room.

"Such as?" I said.

"Such as being assigned here together."

I bit my lip. "Oh yes, Lord Jesus!"

"Such as what you're holding in your hands."

I looked down at the Bible. . . .

[Betsie proceeded to thank God for all of their blessings, even the fleas.]

"'Give thanks in all circumstances,'" she quoted. "It doesn't say, 'in pleasant circumstances.' Fleas are part of this place where God has put us."

*And so we stood between piers of bunks and gave thanks for fleas. But this time I was sure Betsie was wrong. [Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Bantam, 1971), 197–99; emphasis in original]*

Surely this story of Betsie and Corrie can be an inspirational model to each of us. Betsie's thanksgiving and ministry changed Corrie's life and the lives of others around her. But who was right? Is it important to give thanks in all circumstances? Our natural tendency is to not give thanks but to complain when circumstances are perceived as unfavorable. In doing so, our complaining spirit dims not only our light but that of others. President Lorenzo Snow said:

If a person wants to enjoy the Spirit of the Lord, let him, when something of a very disagreeable nature comes along, think how worse the circumstance might be. . . . Always cultivate a spirit of gratitude. It is actually the duty of every Latter-day Saint to cultivate a spirit of gratitude. [Teachings of Lorenzo Snow, comp. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 61–62]

Many times I have felt weighed down by a circumstance only to reflect later that I had diminished the moment by lacking perspective. We simply cannot understand the ultimate consequences of any trying situation. The irony of Corrie's circumstances was that those fleas were indeed an ultimate blessing of freedom as they kept the guards from entering the barracks. This allowed Betsie and Corrie to hold group Bible study and to give and receive many other blessings that would not have been allowed with regular inspections by the guards. Perhaps we get so focused on the fleas of our lives that we fail to recognize blessings. Generally, with hindsight, we see the wisdom of optimism in the face of previous trials. And, sometimes like Betsie and Corrie, it doesn't take long for our perspective to change and perhaps see fleas as net blessings. For example, though the pains of loneliness, self-doubt, and rejection in social situations hurt terribly when we are young, I can see now how these experiences mold us into more empathetic, self-reliant, and successful older adults. Wouldn't it be more constructive if we could embrace life more positively and be humbly grateful for our circumstances without the need for hindsight?

If we expect too much comfort, we rob ourselves of joy, and we are seldom in the state of mind and spirit to learn and progress. While serving in BYU wards, I have occasionally seen this tendency in marriages. Often we thoughtlessly assign rigid roles to others. In these roles that we erroneously assign, we come to expect service from others. I might have concluded that Cameron's Primary teacher had a role, a calling, and I should expect the selfless service of teaching my son just as he should expect that I magnify my Church callings. What could be wrong with that? Shouldn't I expect similar things from God, my spouse, the bishop, my home teacher, and so on? It is easy to convince ourselves of the rightness of such thinking, but it is nevertheless perilous. We live in an age and society where hope becomes expectation, and expectation

turns quickly into entitlement. When we feel "entitled" to much, there is little room for gratitude to God or to anyone else. As attributed to Richard Whately, an English theologian from the 19th century, "It is generally true that all that is required to make men unmindful of what they owe God for any blessing is that they should receive that blessing often and regularly." If I expect service from others, soon it will be taken for granted. And this service, if regularly given, will be viewed as our due.

President Hinckley has, as always, expressed these concerns very clearly:

Our society is afflicted by a spirit of thoughtless arrogance unbecoming to those who have been so magnificently blessed. How grateful we should be for the bounties we enjoy. Absence of gratitude is the mark of the narrow, uneducated mind. It bespeaks a lack of knowledge and the ignorance of self-sufficiency. [Gordon B. Hinckley, Faith, Essence of True Religion (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 81–82]

Lack of perspective, selfishness, and pride have always led people ultimately to sorrow. Yet society today often seems to embrace these traits as virtues. Christ-centered gratitude never focuses on reciprocity. When we feel and express gratitude, expecting others to have similar feelings and forms of expression, we are bound to be disappointed. This might lead us to be angry with or alienated from God or man because their actions do not match our expectations. President Joseph F. Smith said:

It is always safer and better to enjoy the gratitude which we feel to others than to set store upon the gratitude which we think others should have toward us. 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! [Joseph F. Smith, Editorial Thoughts, “Shall We Make Gratitude a Debt?” *Juvenile Instructor* 38, no. 8 (15 April 1903): 243]

God is the Creator, and from Him all blessings flow. When we do as the song counsels, “Count your many blessings” (“Count Your Blessings,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 241), it is not only great therapy, it draws us closer to our Father in Heaven. I would like to mention just a few of these general blessings that most of us enjoy.

First, we are blessed with sound minds. Students, this is true notwithstanding that grade you got on an exam this semester. Most of you expect to graduate from BYU. Many of you expect to live in economic environments where education is extremely valued in the marketplace. For example, the median income in the U.S. for college graduates is approximately \$20,000 per year higher than for those with a 12th-grade education (*Current Population Survey* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Bureau of the Census, 1997], P-60). The 50 lowest-ranking countries in the world have per capita incomes that are approximately one-fiftieth of per capita incomes in North America and Western Europe (*International Financial Statistics Yearbook* [Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 1999]). Even struggling BYU students have much to be thankful for economically compared to those beset by starvation, inadequate shelter, and little or no access to health services throughout much of the world.

Second, many, if not most of us, have had great family support. Like Nephi, we were born of goodly parents and have siblings and others close to us who have taught us right from wrong, civility, the good news of the gospel, and the value of hard work. They have modeled these correct choices for us. We have seen in their countenances the joy that comes from

making good choices consistent with the gospel. We are awed by the cumulative effect of these wise choices in their lives. On a personal note, I want to thank my wife, my parents, my brothers and sister, my children, and others in my family and heritage for being such vivid models of the benefits of righteous living.

Third, we belong to a strong community. I’m speaking here particularly of the Church and of all the opportunities, friendships, and connections that it brings. It gives opportunities to belong, to learn, and to serve. The Church works a mighty miracle in our lives as we interact with, listen to, and follow the counsel of inspired leaders. Coarse, selfish behavior is replaced by an enlightened knowledge of the joy that service and kindness to others bring. For me, I have the unusual and wonderful opportunity to work each day among students, staff, and faculty who exemplify these Christian attributes.

Fourth, and most important, we know who we are in relationship to our Father in Heaven. We know what He has put in place and what is expected of us. We have an abiding understanding that “all things shall work together for [our] good” (D&C 90:24) because there is guidance and there is a plan for our eternal happiness. We have a knowledge of the loving sacrifice of the Savior, who “suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent” (D&C 19:16). We understand the peace and happiness that come from humble obedience and faith.

Returning again to the central theme of my talk, is it required that we be similarly sensitive to those blessings given by others? By sensitive, I mean to feel gratitude and to express thanks through word or deed or both. Do we free ride in our relationships to others when we aren’t gracious in this sense? President Hinckley has addressed directly how I should react and feel, especially to those who serve me and my children in the Church:

*Brethren and sisters of the Church, there must be warmth in the work of the Lord. There must be friendship. There must be love unfeigned. There must be appreciation and thanks expressed. There must be constant nurturing with the good word of God. All of these are small things, so easy to do, and they make so great a difference. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "There Must Be Messengers," *Ensign*, October 1987, 5]*

And Elder James E. Talmage told us:

*The capacity to feel and the ability to express gratitude or thanks not only reaches below man's mentality and spiritual conception, but exists beyond and above him, for its source is divine. [James E. Talmage, *Sunday Night Talks: A Series of Radio Addresses* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1931), 483]*

The answer to my question is clear: The expression of gratitude to others is itself a blessing.

This does not mean that we have a different standard toward anyone, particularly strangers. Just as the Savior taught that there are two great commandments—to love God and our neighbor—proper relationships and gratitude both felt and expressed to others is central to building bonds between individuals. If I may, I'd like to demonstrate this with a personal example.

My father passed away in an untimely accident when I was a young man. It was a great loss to our family and to others who loved him. He was very devoted to his work as foreman of a large orchard, to Church service, and to his family and mankind. Sometimes it was hard for me to share him with others, and it was difficult to understand the impact of his life on others. At his passing, many in the Church and in the rest of the community graciously expressed their gratitude for his good life of service. But none had greater impact than the humble Hispanic migrant farm worker

who knocked on our door. None of the family really knew him. Many of his circumstances, beliefs, and choices in life were very different from ours. However, he forcefully yet humbly expressed that my father had treated him unusually—with dignity, respect, concern, and love. This man talked about how much he had loved my father in return. I only wish this man could know how much this simple expression of appreciation and gratitude has meant and continues to mean to me and my family.

For me, one of the most profound questions in the scriptures is found in the Sermon on the Mount, when the Savior asked: "For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" (Matthew 5:46). If we truly recognize the divine origins of those around us, we will reach out to those who are not friends or even friendly. And certainly we will be grateful for the kindnesses and service given to us by others, as was the migrant worker for my father's service.

Well, in closing, what might we do to more fully develop and express gratitude? I will mention only a few suggestions. They may be conceptually very simple, but I feel they are behaviorally deep.

First, let us see the world as a better place where gratitude is expressed. This implies that we graciously receive the gratitude expressed to us. Let us not subscribe to the convenient rationalization that "next to ingratitude, the most painful thing to bear is gratitude" (Henry Ward Beecher, *Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit* [New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1887], 229).

Second, let each of us reflect thoughtfully on our life and on God's goodness to us. If we do this more regularly and intently, understanding the spiritual dimension of gratitude, we will be able to gain greater perspective. Perhaps more fleas become counted as blessings. A quote that nicely sums up this process is from the English religious writer Hannah More:

There are three requisites to our proper enjoyment of every earthly blessing which God bestows on us;—a thankful reflection on the goodness of the giver, a deep sense of the unworthiness of the receiver, and a sober recollection of the precarious tenure by which we hold it. The first would make us grateful, the second humble, the last moderate. [Hannah More, in “The Love of God,” chapter 7 of *Practical Piety*, in *The Complete Works of Hannah More*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835), 441]

Let’s express heartfelt gratitude to our Father in Heaven. As with the healed Samaritan leper in Luke, expression will bring clarity, purity, and spiritual power.

Third, an important way we can show gratitude to God and to our families is by being as Christlike as we can be. President Hunter said:

We pay our debt of gratitude by living in such a way as to bring credit to our parents and the name we bear, by doing good to others, by being of service, by being willing to share the light and knowledge we have received. [Teachings of Howard W. Hunter, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 93]

Fourth, assuming that we feel gratitude toward those close to us, especially our families, let’s express it. I recently heard a noted television commentator discussing personal and family relationships. I cannot quote her, but she said essentially that we should not expect gratitude from our children. Gratitude

proceeds from generation to subsequent generations. That is, parents should feel gratitude and thanks for their children, but the parents are in for a big disappointment if they expect gratitude from their children. However, the very purpose of the gospel is to change us and improve our relationships with one another. God gave us the fifth of the 10 commandments, to “Honour thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12), for this reason. It would probably be a good idea for us to reflect often about those things that we admire in each of our loved ones and let those thoughts find greater expression.

Fifth, let us take inventory of how others beyond our families bless our lives. Heartfelt expressions of gratitude show that we value these individuals and their service. It is the *very least* that we can do to avoid being a free rider, a taker only. More positively, expressions of gratitude will strengthen bonds between people and improve the welfare of both the giver and receiver. Economists naturally like such exchanges and sometimes refer to them as mutually beneficial exchanges.

The Book of Mormon opens with Nephi’s hymn of gratitude to others, as noted by “born of goodly parents” and “having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days” (1 Nephi 1:1). May we in all things follow this example. And let us help others reach their divine potential and thereby increase our joy and the joy of our Father in Heaven. This is my prayer in the name of His Beloved Son and the Exemplar to us all, even Jesus Christ, amen.