



Family Times

Gratitude in Marriage and Family Life

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Quotable:

“Someone has said that an ungrateful man is like a hog under a tree eating apples and never looking up to see where they come from.”



I love the fall. I believe it is my favorite time of year. I love the change in seasons, the golden leaves that cover our lawns, the fact that it's completely dark by 5:30 p.m., and that you can put your young children in bed by 7:30 [theoretically].

I also enjoy this great time of year where we have opportunities to reflect on our blessings, and express thanks to our God for all that we have.

Personally, I am thankful for a wife that teaches me about gratitude almost daily. My first real lesson came twenty plus years ago when we were driving the long, arduous trek from Provo, Utah to our homes in suburbs of Houston. The weather was treacherous that year, and we spent most of the time driving across snow bound freeways. I had driven all night, and at sunrise, we arrived in New Mexico and Janie took the wheel from there. Interstate 40 became a sheet of ice, and early that morning, we hit a patch of ice while driving across a bridge. As our car was spinning uncontrollably, and my fiancée was screaming, I woke up just in time to see that we were going to hit the guard rail on the bridge. But, miraculously, we didn't.

However, we ended up in the median of the highway in about 10 feet of snow. There was no way out except to pay a tow truck driver a nice chunk of change to pull us to safety. As we got back on the road, Janie looked at me and said, “Don't you think we ought to offer of prayer of thanks?” I remember thinking something profound, like “Oh yea.” So, she offered a simple and beautiful prayer, expressing gratitude that 1) we were alive, 2) that we didn't hit the guard rail, 3) that we were able to get out of the situation, and 3) that we were back on the road and heading home to see our families. If it wasn't for Janie, I probably wouldn't have thought much about our “great luck” that day.

The lesson was cemented deeper into my soul a few days later as I found myself at Janie's house on Christmas morning. After the Santa experience, and all the presents were unwrapped, her family knelt next to each other, beside a beautiful Christmas tree, while her mother offered a heartfelt prayer, expressing thanks for the wonderful Christmas they were able to have, and for

their many joyous blessings that year. Now I knew why my fiancé was always expressing gratitude— she had been taught by loving parents that great principle of the gospel.

In the Doctrine and Covenants, it says “Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things (D&C 59:7). In the same section, we learn that the worst thing we can do to our Father in heaven is to withhold our gratitude and not confess “his hand in all things” (D&C 59:21).

President James E. Faust taught that “a grateful heart is a beginning of greatness. It is an expression of humility. It is a foundation for the development of such virtues as prayer, faith, courage, contentment, happiness, love, and well-being” (*Ensign*, May 1990, 86).

President Ezra Taft Benson wrote the following: “Someone has said that an ungrateful man is like a hog under a tree eating apples and never looking up to see where they come from. How often do we look up to see where our blessings come from?”

“The Prophet Joseph Smith is reported to have said that one of the greatest sins

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They Said It!

Within what is allotted to us, we can have spiritual contentment. Paul described it as “godliness with contentment,” signifying the adequate presence of attributes such as love, hope, meekness, patience, and submissiveness”
—Neal A. Maxwell



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The saints would be guilty would be ingratitude. I presume most of us have not thought of that as a serious sin. There’s a great tendency for us in our prayers to ask for additional blessings. Sometimes I feel we need to devote more of our prayers to expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving for blessings already received. I do not think we’re less grateful than other people—but we have so much more to be grateful for. This was driven home to me as a young man when my grandfather, who had been the bishop of a little country ward in Whitney, Idaho, told me about a visit made to his house by Elder Joseph F. Smith, who would later become President of the Church.

*“Grandfather said that they were seated in the living room/dining room combination of the farmhouse. The table was laden with good things to eat. The family was gathered around. Just before they were ready to start the meal, Elder Smith stretched his long arms over the table and turned to my grandfather and said, “Brother Benson, all this and the gospel too!” What did he mean? All this and the gospel too! The food represented the material blessings of life—food, clothing, and all the rest. This family of children—home, family, loved ones—all that the world has and the gospel too. I think that’s what the President had in mind” (Ezra Taft Benson, “All This and the Gospel Too,” *New Era*, Nov. 1991, 4).*

Are we grateful for our blessings? For our spouses?

Our children? It is so easy to focus on our problems, and the things that we don’t have, that we often lose sight, or don’t see the great blessings we do have. Recently, my only son left on a mission. I knew it would be a difficult adjustment for me. Not only is my son, well, my son, but he’s basically been one my best friends. Next to my wife, I’m not sure if I’ve been closer to another person on the earth. Our relationship has been more like two brothers rather than father and son, often slugging each other in the thigh, wrestling at the drop of a hat, and arguing about what sports teams are best and why. I was not prepared for the emotions I felt when he walked out of that giant room in the Missionary Training Center and our family walked the opposite direction. I found myself sobbing like a baby. I thought it would get easier the next couple of days, but it actually got worse. When we arrived home, I would go up to his room, and begin weeping again. This went on for a day or two. I was also feeling sorry for myself—I would not longer be able to watch my son play high school sports. Not to mention that I would be in a home with all girls [I wouldn’t trade my girls for anything, by the way]. Who would I talk sports with? Who would I watch BYU games with? Who would I punch in the thigh when they walked down the hall?

Just a few days ago, I found myself watching the BYU football game with most of my daughters. I remember

thinking, “Life doesn’t get much better than this.” Then, last night, I watched my twin daughters, for the second game in a row, be recognized as the high point scorers on their High School basketball team. As I watched them, I thought, “Could life get any better than this?” Later, last night, as I was driving home from the McKinney High School football game with three of my daughters and one of their friends, and we were making jokes and laughing the whole way home [I feel sorry for my wife because I realize that most of my children have my sense of humor], I thought, “Could life get any better?” What could be better than laughing with your children. I have realized that I could focus on missing my son, or enjoying my other children and laughing with them. I choose to laugh.

In a critical address for me, I learned from Elder Neal A. Maxwell that being content with the things we have is an indicator of spiritual progression. In a general conference address, he said, “*In just a few words, a major insight came to the conscientious and the converted through Alma: “For I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me” (Alma 29:3)....we are to do what we can within our allotted “acreage,” while still using whatever stretch there may be in any tethers. Within what is allotted to us, we can have spiritual contentment. Paul described it as “godliness with contentment,” signifying the adequate presence of attributes such as love, hope, meekness, patience, and submissiveness (1 Tim. 6:6).*

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Being content means acceptance without self-pity. Meekly borne, however, deprivations such as these can end up being like excavations that make room for greatly enlarged souls.

Some undergo searing developments that cut suddenly into mortality's status quo. Some have trials to pass through, while still others have allotments they are to live with. Paul lived with his "thorn in the flesh" ([2 Cor. 12:7](#)).

Suffice it to say, such mortal allotments will be changed in the world to come. The exception is unrepented sin that shapes our status in the next world.

Thus, developing greater contentment within certain of our existing constraints and opportunities is one of our challenges. Otherwise we may feel underused, underwhelmed, and underappreciated—while, ironically, within our givens are unused opportunities for service all about us. Neither should we pine away, therefore, for certain things outside God's givens, such as for the powerful voice of an angel, because there is so much to do within what has been allotted to us (see [Alma 29:3-4](#)). Furthermore, varied as our allotted circumstances may be, we can still keep the commandments of God!

Thus "the holy present" contains the allotted acres for our discipleship. We need not be situated in prime time with prime visibility in order to work out our own salvation!

In contrast, however, as to improving our behavior, there

are no borders that we cannot cross and no shortage of visas for those willing to venture!

Incremental improvement is, therefore, the order of the day, and it clearly requires the accompaniment of the Lord's long-suffering as we struggle to learn the necessary lessons.

Mary, having been told some wondrous things about herself and what lay ahead, nevertheless "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" ([Luke 2:19](#)). Pondering often precedes contentment.

*Performance is what matters, not the size of the stage. The Sea of Galilee, only 13 miles by 7, was nevertheless large enough to provide the disciples with a vital experience involving faith and walking on the water (see [Matt. 14:22-33](#)). The wind was boisterous and frightening! Even so, compare the size of those Galilean swells and the length of that storm with what Nephi and party had to endure on the vast ocean! (see [1 Ne. 18:13-21](#)). Yet both episodes provided the needed learning experiences. Of course, I should be careful about comparisons involving excesses of water, realizing Noah is in the historical audience! (Neal A. Maxwell, "Content with the Things Allotted unto Us," *Ensign*, May 2000, 72-74).*

We need to be grateful for the things the Lords has blessed us with. Perhaps our spouse isn't what we have always dreamed about. Maybe he or she is a little messier than we would like,

or disorganized, or never makes our favorite meal. We should be content with what we have and look for the good things our spouse does for us. We may be discontent with some of our children who manage to "suck the life out of us," but would we really want that child out of our life? My guess is that we wouldn't. Sure, our financial circumstances may not allow us to live in the home we always dreamed about, or drive the car we wished we could. However— we need to count our blessings.

There is no question, in marriage and family life, we often take each other for granted. This can cause an apathy in our relationships that can take years to repair. Most often, we do not appreciate our loved ones until they leave for school, or go on a mission, or perhaps even pass on to the next life.

One of our former General Authorities made the following observation:

"I remember a grandmother who had been widowed early in her life and was moving out of her home. Her granddaughter, about to be married herself, was carefully helping her pack the boxes of dishes and the faded towels. "See that sewing machine over there in the corner?" the grandmother asked. "Your grandfather always left his hat there when he came home in the evening. I used to scold him all the time about it. 'Just put your hat on the hook,' I'd say. 'Why does your hat always have to be on the sewing machine messing everything up?' Then one day he got pneumonia and died, leaving



"Take care. It is so easy to break eggs without making omelettes." (C.S. Lewis, cited in Richard L. Evans, Richard Evans' Quote Book, Salt Lake City: Publisher's Press, 1971, 169).



C.S. Lewis



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four little children and me to miss him for a lifetime. How many times through the years I've thought, What I'd give to see that hat on the sewing machine, placed there by his own hand!"

"Like the grandmother in this story, we too often let trifles cloud our vision. We get caught up in nonessentials or in a multitude of meetings, both in and out of the Church, that have no particular meaning or purpose. We sometimes nag the people we love the best over little inattentions, small faults, mere nothings in the whole scheme of things. Instead of treasuring the all-too-rare moments we share with our dear ones, we pick at faults, imagined or otherwise. How many of us say to our wives, our husbands, our children: "Why can't you do this?" "Why don't you do that?" Or "Someday when I have the time ..."

"Our last daughter left for college this past month, and the eighteen years of daily living with her were suddenly over. Where had they gone? What minute, what hour, what day or night had swallowed up all those joyous, giggling, growing-up years? The first night she was away, I slipped into her bedroom, looked at her record player, and thought of all those times I had mechanically said, "Would you turn down the music!" And I thought, too, how often in the days ahead we'd be longing to hear the music. Thank God she and her parents have many wonderful memories to savor in the years ahead.

"Why do those sudden moments of clarity, when we realize how precious our loved ones are, come so rarely? How do we let ourselves get caught up in fault-finding, digging, or scolding at those who are nearest our hearts? Is it ever worth it? As C. S. Lewis once advised, "Take care. It is so easy to break eggs without making omelettes." (Cited in Richard L. Evans, *Richard Evans' Quote Book*, Salt Lake City: Publisher's Press, 1971, p. 169.).....

"Well, life is fleeting at best. We turn around and we're young, turn around again and we're old. Minutes rush past. We can't stop them in all their rush. We're eighteen; we're twenty-eight; we're forty-eight; we're gray. Is there ever enough time to nag, scold, dig, or complain at the people we love most? We fool ourselves if we think there is. There's only time to stop, as one has put it, to smell the flowers...."

"Do you remember Julia Ward Howe who told a senator on one occasion, "I am in need of help for a very special person"?"

"Julia, I am so busy", he said, "I can no longer concern myself with individuals."

She replied, "That's remarkable. Even God hasn't reached that stage yet." (See *Richard Evans' Quote Book*, p. 165.).....

Concern yourself first with individuals, with relationships, with loved ones. What else really matters? Don't imagine yourself, regardless

of who you are, busier than the Lord, who puts souls first above everything else.

"The other night I was flying home from a distant conference. I had been away only three days, but as the flood lights of the airport loomed up, I welled up with anticipation and excitement. I felt as though I could have been a great hero returning from space—and what caused this excitement? I was going back to my family. Does it have to take flights away from home, a child leaving for college, or the death of a husband who will never again leave his hat in an awkward place to remind us how sweet are the moments with our loved ones and friends? How brief they are in the run of time? Does it take these things to stop us in our picking at trifling faults to realize the beauty of every minute together? (Paul H. Dunn, *Ensign*, November 1977, 24-26).

One of my favorite hymns has always been, "Count Your Many Blessings." In my opinion, we probably do not sing it enough.

Consider the following lyrics:

When upon life's billows you
are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged,
thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings;
name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what
the Lord has done.

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.

When you look at others with
their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised

you his wealth untold.

Count your many blessings;
money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven
nor your home on high.

So amid the conflict,
whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged;
God is over all.

Count your many blessings;
angels will attend,
Help and comfort give
you to your journey's end.

[Chorus]

Count your blessings;
Name them one by one.
Count your blessings;
See what God hath done.
Count your blessings;
Name them one by one.
Count your many blessings;
See what God hath done.

What are you most grateful for? What are some of the small blessings in your life that you tend to overlook because of the seemingly big problems that become all consuming? I invite you to make a list of ten of your choicest blessings, and share them with your family. If you are like me, indeed, it will "surprise you what the Lord has done."

