Law 2
COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS
DEVELOP THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

*Thou hast given so much to me ... give me one thing more,*

*a grateful heart. (George Herbert)*

Sir John Templeton is a world-famous financier and philanthropist. His objective in making money, he once said in an interview, was to give most of it away. Year by year he gives away millions of dollars to organisations and charities all over the world. The Templeton Award for Excellence is well known and coveted.

Every morning when Sir John awakes he lies quietly on his bed and thinks of five new ways in which he has been blessed. He says that he finds this simple procedure spiritually enriching and believes that this is one of the chief reasons why so much peace and contentment floods his life.

I wonder how your day begins. Do you pour yourself a cup of coffee, turn on the radio or television to get the latest news report, at the same time exposing yourself to the countless advertisers who tell you what you must do to make yourself happy? If so, then you might be better off adopting Sir John Templeton’s approach by lying quietly in your bed after you have awakened and thinking of five new ways you have been blessed.

FOCUS ON YOUR BLESSINGS

As a counsellor, one of the things I have noticed is that people who focus more on the good things that happen to them than the bad are more buoyant, more confident and more positive than those who take things for granted.

It is another law of life, I believe, that the more we dwell on what we have, rather than what we don’t have, the more the personality is drawn to health.
Of course, there are people who claim that their lives are so beset with troubles and trials that they have nothing to be thankful for. But, if you cultivate the right perspective, there is something to be thankful for in every situation.

An old Welsh Methodist preacher by the name of Robert Jones was well known for his ability to always find something to be thankful for. One Sunday as he made his way to church he was caught in a tremendous downpour of rain. He arrived at the church just as the service was about to start and, being a stickler for punctuality, refused the appeal of the deacons to change into some dry clothes.

As he entered the pulpit he invited the congregation to bow their heads for the opening prayer. ‘We thank Thee, O Lord …’ he began. The congregation, seeing his bedraggled condition, wondered what he would thank the Lord for on this occasion.

Raising his voice he said once again, ‘We thank Thee, O Lord …’ Pausing for a few seconds he lifted his voice still more and said, ‘We thank Thee, O Lord … that it isn’t always like this!’

I once preached a Sunday sermon in my church in central London on the theme ‘A recipe for thanksgiving’. After the service a man came up to me and said that he had nothing to be thankful for. Life had dealt hardly with him, he claimed. He had no job and the unemployment benefit he received did not allow him to enjoy the luxuries of life such as the theatre, meals out in restaurants and so on.

I invited him to join me the following day on my pastoral rounds. Monday was always the day when I tried to pack in as many pastoral visits as possible. We began in court where I had agreed to speak on behalf of a man who had been caught selling drugs, but had since become a Christian.
Before it was my turn to speak we watched a procession of down-and-outs being brought before the magistrates for all kinds of minor offences. Etched on their faces was the pain of emptiness and despair.

I didn’t say anything to my companion but I wondered what he thought as he watched this procession of people who were less fortunate than himself.

From there we moved to a hospital to see one of my church members, a woman of thirty years of age who had lost her sight when a gas boiler burst in her home and damaged her eyes.

Not far away from her, in the same ward, also from our church, a woman who had given birth to a still-born baby.

From there we went to an institution for the aged and the poor. Local ministers took services there every Monday and this day it was my turn. About seventy or eighty people sat in a room at midday waiting for the 45-minute service to begin. Many of them were in a pitiable condition.

Some were hard of hearing or quite deaf, some had poor sight or were quite blind, others were hardly lucid and most were unable to find the page in the hymnbook from which we were singing.

When the service was over we slipped into a café on the Strand for a bite to eat and my companion asked me where I was going next. I said I was going to see a couple who were one-time missionaries in the Far East but who had contracted a disease which was so horrific that they could not expose themselves to the public gaze.

‘Once a month I visit them, pray with them and give them communion. After that I am due to visit a children’s hospital and try to cheer up the eight-year-old daughter of one of my church members – she has a terminal illness.’
He sat quietly for a few moments and then said, ‘I don’t think I will come with you on the afternoon visits. I have seen enough. Never again will I say I have nothing to be thankful for.’

Having seen so many people less fortunate than himself his perspective had changed.

**LOOK FOR THE GOOD**

Another thing I have noticed in my work as a Christian counsellor is how so many become preoccupied with the bad things that can happen in life. This is often made worse by the spread of communication which has become so sophisticated in recent decades. As I am sure you have noticed, the world is flooded with bad news, and this is making people depressed at a time when prosperity in the developed countries is greater than ever. Many newspapers interpret everything in bearish terms. And this has a distressing effect. There is only a certain amount of bad news one can take.

Gary Moore, a member of the Board of Advisors for the John Templeton Foundation, tells of interviewing Sir John on the subject of the good and bad encounters he had had with the media over the years. Here’s what Sir John had to say:

> There has always been something in human nature that makes you buy a newspaper that has the most horrible headlines. Because of that, to be successful in the publishing or television business, you have to feed the public these catastrophes or the negative viewpoint. Therefore the public is brainwashed. There are not enough people who are independent enough to do their own analysis and studying and see that, yes, there are problems but for every problem there are at least ten blessings.”

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1. [Law Number 2: Count Your Blessings](#)
‘For every problem there are at least ten blessings!’ Is that really so? My experience says it is.

What would happen if we cultivated the attitude of looking for the blessings that crowd into our lives instead of focusing only on the bad things that happen to us? I will tell you. Life would take on a whole different meaning.

Charles Spurgeon, the great London preacher who had such influence in the nineteenth century, said this:

> It is a delightful and profitable occupation to mark the hand of God in the lives of His ancient saints and to observe his goodness in delivering them, His mercy in pardoning them, and His faithfulness in keeping his covenant with them. But would it not be more interesting and profitable for us to notice the hand of God in our own lives?

Dr W.E. Sangster, another influential London pastor, now deceased, tells an interesting story in one of his books concerning the business depression that took place in the United States in the last century.²

A group of ministers sat together in a room discussing the state of affairs in the nation. One of them said, ‘I have got to preach on Thanksgiving Day and I want to say something affirming; but what can I say that is affirming in a period of depression such as this?’

One of the ministers who was present and heard that statement, Professor William Stidger of the School of Theology in Boston, Massachusetts, took those words to heart and for the next few days began to think of the blessings he had received in life and for which he was truly thankful.

As he reflected on his life there came singing into his consciousness the memory of a school teacher who had taught him in kindergarten and
of whom he had not heard for many years. Although it was a kindergarten
class he still remembered that she had instilled in him a love of verse,
something he had been grateful for all his life.

Realising that he had never thanked her for her contribution to his
life he sat down and wrote a letter of thanks to the old lady. A few days
later he received this reply, written in a feeble scrawl:

My dear Willie,

I cannot tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my eighties,
living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely and like the
last leaf of Autumn, lingering behind. You will be interested to know that
I taught in school for fifty years and yours is the first note of apprecia-
tion I ever received. It came on a blue-cold morning and it cheered me as
nothing has in many years.

The professor wept when he read that note. It prompted him to think of
others who had been good to him and he remembered one of his old bishops
who had gone out of his way to encourage him at the beginning of his ministry.

The bishop was now in retirement and had recently lost his wife so
he wrote him a belated letter of condolence and thanks. This was the reply
he got from the aged cleric:

My dear Will

Your letter was so beautiful, so real, that as I sat reading it in my
study, tears fell from my eyes; tears of gratitude. Then before I
realised what I was doing, I rose from my chair and called her name
to show it to her – forgetting for a moment that she was gone. You will
never know how much your letter has warmed my spirit. I have
been walking about in the glow of it all day long.
I tell you it pleases not only people but God also when we show our appreciation to those who have helped us on the way. The Almighty often sends His special blessings by way of people and I think He likes His agents to be thanked also. We need to be aware that mercies stream to us not only from heaven but from our fellow men as well.

How sad it is when a man or woman demonstrates the opposite of thankfulness – ingratitude or peevishness. An incident in the life of King Hiram illustrates this better than any other section of Scripture I know.

King Solomon, in return for the many favours King Hiram had given him, presented him with the gift of twenty towns which were north of Galilee. But Hiram was not impressed with Solomon’s gift. In fact he hated it. Here’s the story:

At the end of twenty years, during which Solomon built these two buildings – the temple of the LORD and the royal palace – King Solomon gave twenty towns in Galilee to Hiram king of Tyre, because Hiram had supplied him with all the cedar and pine and gold he wanted. But when Hiram went from Tyre to see the towns that Solomon had given him, he was not pleased with them. ‘What kind of towns are these you have given me, my brother?’ he asked. And he called them the Land of Cabul, a name they have to this day.

1 Kings 9:10–13

Because King Hiram did not like the cities Solomon had given him he called them by the name Cabul, a Hebrew word-play, meaning ‘as nothing’.

Apparently, in those days, according to Eastern etiquette, anyone who gave a gift expected one in return. King Hiram had given Solomon 120 talents of gold and in return Solomon made him a gift of twenty towns.
But the gift of twenty towns was not what he wanted so he called them by a name that reflected his peevishness – ‘Nothing’. Was it not Shakespeare who said, ‘Blow, blow thou winter wind, thou art not so unkind as man’s ingratitude’?

One wag said there are two kinds of people in the world – those who say there are two kinds of people and those who don’t! As far as thanksgiving is concerned, humanity can be divided into two groups: those who take things for granted and those who take things with gratitude. My concern throughout most of the days of my ministry has been to increase the number of those who take things with gratitude.

I came across this the other day, the source of which I have not been able to trace:

Today, upon a bus, I saw a lovely maid with golden hair,
I envied her, she seemed so bright, and wished I were as fair.
When suddenly she rose to leave, I saw her hobble down the aisle;
She had one foot and wore a crutch, but as she passed she smiled.
O God, forgive me when I whine;
I have two feet and the world is mine.

And then I stopped to buy some sweets;
the lad who sold them had such charm.
I talked with him and he said to me, It’s nice to talk with folks like you;
You see, he said, I’m blind.
Oh God, forgive me when I whine;
I have two eyes and the world is mine.

Then walking down the street I saw a child with eyes of blue.
He stood and watched the others play
But seemed he knew not what to do.
I stopped for a moment and said:
Why don’t you join the others, my dear?
He looked ahead without a word and then I knew –
He could not hear.
O God, forgive me when I whine;
I have two ears and the world is mine.

Someone has said that the most foolish person in the world is that person who focuses on what he or she does not have to the exclusion of what they do have. I agree. If we would spend as much time dwelling on our blessings as we do our difficulties we would be a good deal better off spiritually and psychologically.

How different life is when we learn to develop a trawling eye to look for the good things that happen in our lives.

When I was a boy we used to sing this song in the church I attended:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one;*
*Count your blessings, see what God has done;*
*Count your blessings, name them one by one;*
*And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.*

One preacher says this is good but impossible advice. You can’t count them; your arithmetic is not good enough. There are scores of them which you are not even aware of. But you can think of *some* of them.
CHOOSE TO BE THANKFUL

Do you find it difficult to think of things for which you can be grateful? Then open up your Bible to Psalm 103. Here’s how the opening section reads:

Praise the Lord, O my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits –
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

Psa. 103:1–5

The psalmist goes on for another twenty verses and finishes on the same note: ‘Praise the Lord, O my soul.’ You can’t help but feel that as he writes he is experiencing what one writer has called ‘the spontaneous overflow of a swelling heart’.

‘But I don’t always feel like that,’ I have heard people say, ‘and surely to praise God when you don’t feel like it is hypocrisy.’

Let’s look at that argument a little more closely. Notice how the psalmist begins: ‘Praise the Lord, O my soul.’

See what he is doing? He is charging his soul to praise the Lord. He is saying, in effect, I am going to use my will to stir up my mind to focus on reasons why I should praise the Lord. I may not feel like doing it but I am
going to do it anyway!

We can choose to praise God whether we feel like it or not. We don’t have to wait until something happens that evokes praise in our heart; we can by an action of our will stir our minds to contemplate the goodness of God, and when we do that, a law of the personality goes into action, namely that what we think about will soon affect the way we feel. I have never found it to fail.

No matter how difficult things are you have a choice to praise Him or not praise Him, to thank Him or not thank Him. It’s sad when Christians wait until they feel like praising rather than using their wills to command their minds to focus on reasons for praise.

Stirring his mind to action brings up a number of reasons for the psalmist to praise – eight in fact: divine benefits, forgiveness, healing, redemption, love and compassion, satisfaction and renewal.

He begins, as we said, by charging his soul not to forget God’s benefits and soon, as his mind goes to work to identify those benefits, his emotions follow his thoughts like little ducks follow their mother on a pond. And when after twenty-two verses he comes to an end, you feel that it is either his pen or his parchment that have run out and not his stream of praise.

And it all started with a charge to his soul not to forget the Lord’s benefits.

How quickly we forget! We forget past mercies and blessings and we are all the poorer because of it. We would be much calmer and more confident in the presence of new troubles if we had remembered vividly the old deliverances; if we had kept them fresh in mind and been able to say, ‘The God who delivered me then will not desert me now.’
Remember how John Newton put it in his hymn:

_His love in times past forbids me to think_

_He’ll leave me at last in trouble to sink._

One of the reasons I believe we are so fearful in the presence of new dangers is because we forget the good things God has done for us in the past. Many Christians keep what they call a ‘Gratitude Journal’ and when they need to remind themselves of reasons to praise they open it up, and then praise rises because it must.

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones said we would forget the Lord’s death if it were not for the commandment to come regularly to His table.

**THINK – AND GIVE THANKS**

I said earlier that it is a law of life that what we think about affects the way we feel. This is a concept that is well known to psychologists. A whole school of counselling exists, based on this truth, called Rational Emotive Therapy. It says change your thinking and you change your feelings and the next consequence is a change in behaviour.

Remember what Paul told the Philippians:

_Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things._

*Phil. 4:8*

If you want to put this law to the test then clear your mind right now of everything else and begin to focus on all the benefits that God has showered upon you.