



Gratitude: A Highway to Happiness

By Imam Muhammad Magid with Samuel Ross

Of all worldly possessions, few are more precious than a grateful heart. It is a wellspring of belief, attuning us to God's innumerable favors surrounding us and driving us toward His worship. It is a fount from which flows one of this world's greatest pleasures: spiritual contentment. When the heart is grateful, it is also happy.

No better proof of this can be found than the life of the Prophet (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam), who was a paragon of both gratitude and happiness. Though he lived in the most trying of conditions—subsisting for a time on only dates and water, reviled and harassed by his fellow tribesmen, and witnessing the deaths of all of his children except Fatima—he continuously gave thanks and “there was always a smile and sign of happiness upon his blessed face.”¹ One narration records that he once arose from his thin mat of palm leaves, the lines of the foliage imprinted upon his back. Upon seeing this, 'Umar (radiya Allahu anhu) began to weep, exclaiming, “O Messenger of God, the Kings of Byzantium and Persia sleep upon silk, while you, God's Apostle though you are, are living destitute.” Responding to this, a Companion commented that if the kings knew the happiness of the Messenger's heart, they would have sent an army to seize it!

The Prophet once said, “Faith has two halves. The first is patience. The second is gratitude.” Despite its preciousness, however, few of us successfully hold on to shukr, or gratitude. God states in the Qur'an: “Few of My servants are grateful” (34:13). Let us take a moment then to assess our own level of gratitude. How grateful are we? Do we perceive God's favors in our day-to-day life, great and small? How many of His blessings can we identify? Do we regularly thank him for the food that we eat, the clothes that we wear, and the talents that we employ? What about the air that we breathe, the limbs that we use, and even the gift of life itself?

How can we further implement shukr in our lives? We can begin by noting that shukr is part action but also part perception. Two individuals may experience the exact same thing and yet have completely different reactions. Consider Muawiyya of Bani Umayya, a wealthy man, who married an accomplished but poor Bedouin poet. His wife experienced great difficulty adjusting to a luxurious lifestyle and lamented, “To have a wind to blow on my tent / is better for me than this great palace / Wearing my Bedouin garment / is better for me than wearing this silk.” For the grateful human even a humble tent can be better than a palace.

¹ Shma'il of Imam Tirmidhi #334.

Second, we must strive to compare ourselves down instead of up. Consider the example of someone who has purchased a new car. He might be thrilled with the new purchase, enjoying its benefits. Yet if he begins to compare himself up to his neighbor's luxury car, instead of down to his old car or those who have no car at all, he may become despondent. Despite the many virtues of his new car, which a moment ago led him to gratitude and happiness, man is forgetful by nature. Remaining thankful requires that we continuously strive to remember God's blessings upon us. On some level this is impossible, for He says in the Qur'an, "Even if you count the favors of Allah, you will never be able to number them. Most surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (16:18). But we can make progress by focusing upon what our lives would be like without the blessings he has sent.

We can extend this logic not only to our other material possessions but also to our spouses, children, jobs, and anything else that we might take for granted, even our senses and limbs. For what would our life be like without them? A man once went to a scholar and complained of his poverty. The scholar responded, "Would you prefer to lose your eyes and have ten thousand dirhams?" The man replied, "No." The scholar then responded, "Your ears, your hands, your feet?" The man again replied, "No." The scholar then said, "Well, then you have fifty thousand dirhams worth of goods! Why are you complaining?"

While we have health, let us strive to remember those who are sick. While we have wealth, let us strive to remember those who are poor. While we have life, let us strive to remember those who are dead. Let us even strive to remember all those blessings shared by others: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we consume, etc.

If we ever become touched by calamity, whether it be sickness, injury, loss of employment, etc., let us remember that there is always a worse affliction that could have hit us. The worst affliction is after all loss of faith itself. The Prophet Muhammad taught that there is no believer who will ever be touched by calamity, not even a thorn in his foot, without God forgiving his sins as the leaves fall from a tree. Every punishment we receive in this life is a reprieve from a punishment in the next.

The next step is to consider some of the many ways of expressing our gratitude to God and His servants. As Muslims, we can thank God directly by invoking His names, performing dhikr, and declaring our appreciation for His favors upon us. We can also thank our fellow human beings for what they do for us. As Prophet Muhammad said, "Those who are not grateful to the people are not grateful to God."

However, we must never forget that the realm of shukr is not solely the tongue. Consider the weighty hadith qudsi: "On the day of Judgment, God will address a particular individual, 'O Son of Adam! I was sick but you did not attend to Me.' Bewildered, this individual will say, 'How is that possible? You are after all the

Supreme Lord of all the worlds (and cannot fall sick).’ God will reply, ‘Do you not remember that so-and-so among My servants was ill and lying close to you and you did not turn to him in sympathy? If you had but gone near him, you would have found Me beside him.’ In a like manner, God will address another individual, ‘O Son of Adam! I had asked you for a piece of bread; but you would not give it to Me.’ The individual will submit, ‘How is that possible? Can God feel hunger and need bread?’ God will reply, ‘So-and-so among My servants in a moment of hunger had asked you for bread, and did you not refuse to give it to him? If you had given him food, you would have found Me beside him.’” In our neighborhoods and communities, millions call out for the love, food, and support mentioned in this hadith. Imagine the contribution we could make as Muslims if we showed our gratitude to God by extending the lives and resources that He has given us to the weak, poor, and homeless. Nor should our expressions of gratitude be limited to Muslims or even humans. The Companions once asked the Prophet, “O Messenger of God, will we be rewarded for being good to animals?” He responded, “Yes, there is a reward in showing good to every living creature.”

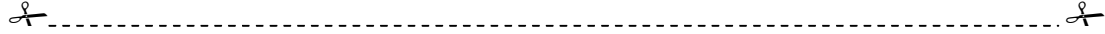
According to one of our greatest scholars, Junayd al-Baghdadi, we can also be grateful to God by not misusing what he has given us, in particular, our bodies. All of our limbs and faculties are gifts from God created for the purpose of drawing near to Him. As God says in the Qur’an: “I have only created jinns and men that they may worship me” (51:56). Imagine if we hand-wove a beautiful carpet from the most expensive materials as a gift to a friend for the purpose of adorning their new house. How would we feel if we then discovered that he or she was using it as their doormat?! When we misuse our eyes, ears, tongues, we perform an act of equal offensiveness.

In the Qur’an, God says: “It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections: that ye may give thanks” (16:78). Let us strive to realize this very purpose of our existence—showing gratitude to God.

We look forward to incorporating your feedback and questions into our future columns. Please send all correspondence to: foodforthespirit@isna.net. Please also visit us at our website where you can download this and previous columns at: <http://www.isna.net/foodforthespirit>

Imam Mohammed ibn Hagmagid is Vice President of ISNA and Executive Director of the ADAMS Center in Sterling, Virginia. His father was an Azhar graduate and a leading scholar in Sudan. Imam Magid studied at the hand of his father and other notable scholars, gaining ijaza in several disciplines, including Maliki Fiqh and Imam Ghazali's 'Ihya ulum Al-deen'. He delivers lectures throughout the United States.

Sam Ross is a student of the Arabic language.



Below are a few exercises we can use to help practice shukr. Please feel free to cut them out and use them in your home, car, office, etc.

- ☪ Choose one aspect of our life each day and ask how we can become more grateful for it.
- ☪ Become grateful for the ni'ma of food by focusing on it's smell and taste, chewing it slowly, and appreciating its role in sustaining our bodies.
- ☪ Become grateful for the ni'ma of a body itself by focusing on the benefits it brings us.
- ☪ Become grateful for the ni'ma of sleep by focusing on the comfort of our pillows, beds, and our state of restfulness in the morning.
- ☪ Look to our spouses with eyes of gratitude, appreciating all that they do for us, and expressing our appreciation to them.
- ☪ After every prayer, repeat the du'a encouraged by the Prophet (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam), "O Allah, help me to remember you, help me to be grateful to you, and help me to worship you in the best way."