Almost a century ago, in an address on spiritual gifts, President George Q. Cannon said the following:

No man ought to say, "Oh, I cannot help this; it is my nature." He is not justified in it, for the reason that God has promised to give strength to correct these things, and to give gifts that will eradicate them. If a man lack wisdom, it is his duty to ask God for wisdom. The same with everything else. That is the design of God concerning His Church. He wants His Saints to be perfected in the truth. For this purpose He gives these gifts, and bestows them upon those who seek after them, in order that they may be a perfect people upon the face of the earth, notwithstanding their many weaknesses, because God has promised to give the gifts that are necessary for their perfection.

In this memorable address, President Cannon also said:

You have need to repent of your hardness of heart, of your indifference and of your carelessness. There is not that diligence, there is not that faith, there is not that seeking for the power of God that there should be among a people who have received the precious promises we have. Instead of the sick being healed, why, it is as much as you can do to get faith to believe that the administration of an elder will be attended with effect. There is not that seeking for the gift of healing and for the gift to be healed that there ought to be among the Saints. And so with other gifts and graces that God has placed in His Church for His people. I say to you that it is our duty to avail ourselves of the privileges which God has placed within our reach. If we have done wrong, repent of our wrong and feel after God, and not be satisfied till we have found Him, and He hears and answers us, and He speaks by His divine power in our hearts, bearing testimony to us in such a manner as cannot be doubted that He hears us, that He is near to us, and that He is watching over us and ready to bestow upon us all the blessings that are necessary for our happiness here and hereafter.

If any of us are imperfect, it is our duty to pray for the gift that will make us perfect. Have I imperfections? I am full of them. What is my duty? To pray to God to give me the gifts that will correct these imperfections. If I am an angry man, it is my duty to pray for charity, which suffereth long and is kind. Am I an envious man? It is my duty to seek for charity, which envieth not. So with all the gifts of the Gospel. They are intended for this purpose. (November 26, 1893, reported in Deseret Weekly 48:33-34.)

This profound counsel comes from a man of great wisdom, and it is something that we today could beneficially accept as a standard. In today's world it would probably be spoken by some of us who are seeking to be comfortable with habits and shortcomings and would declare, "That's just the way I am." In some circles we would probably refer to this as a cop-out or a justification...
for not having the will or desire to improve ourselves by and through the gifts available to us through the truth found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am disheartened and disturbed when I hear people avoiding the blessings and challenges of life by indicating to themselves, their associates, and their family, "I'm sorry, but that's just the way I am." This is an attitude that brings not only complacency but also a lack of progress. It is a prime cause of unhappiness.

How impressive it was in past years to hear President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., pray at a very advanced age for the Lord's assistance in helping him to continue and remain true and faithful to the end. Yes, to finish life's race with victory, and not resign himself to saying, "I'm in my nineties, and that's just the way I am."

How often we hear someone say, "I am just not cut out to be a leader in the Church. It's not my strength. It's not my way. I will attend and go as I feel impressed, but don't expect me to take positions of responsibility and leadership, because I am just not that way." With the gifts that are available from God, every one of us has the opportunity to be the beneficiary of gifts that will make our progress more meaningful and perfect.

It is dangerous for anyone to be lulled into lack of progress because "I just wasn't cut out to be a teacher," or "I wasn't cut out to be a good housekeeper," or "It's all right for other people to do these things, but it's impossible for me because it's just not my nature or strength."

No one has to be content with status quo. I've heard some of my friends who were having difficulty with drugs and alcohol say, "I guess I'm just supposed to be this way. My father was an alcoholic, and it comes natural for me to be the same." There are no reasons for failure and no traits of continuing downgrading just because an associate or family member has taken these routes in the course of life. We need to make up our minds we are going to take ourselves the way we are and, with God's help, add to our gifts and abilities.

It is unfair for us to label ourselves as saddled with this or that because we have failed to realize our potential and the spiritual gifts that are available as we pursue life's trails. It is true that everyone is given a gift. The gifts that are available to us for the benefit of all mankind are for self-improvement, self-development, and self-success so that we may be of value to our associates and those who need our strengths so badly.

I recall visiting at the Utah State Prison years ago during the summer time. As the warden and I visited in the outside recreational and exercise areas, I noticed that some of the men were not wearing shirts and were sweating in the heat. One prisoner who was shirtless had tattooed on his chest the words "A born loser." As I observed this, I thought that it was not too unusual to find someone with this kind of an attitude in prison. Perhaps he had convinced himself that prison was where he belonged, saying to himself, "That's just the way I am." He was conducting himself in such a manner that his stay in the prison would probably be lengthy because he had so identified himself.

Some of the strongest individuals I have met in life have been those who have partaken of spiritual gifts and have improved themselves, lifted themselves up, and become great despite environmental situations that might make it convenient to be comfortable in mediocrity or less.
The Master referred to spiritual gifts as "fruit" or "fruits." He said: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. . . . Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you." (John 15:5, 16.)

In his memorable and powerful speech, President Cannon said: "How many of you, when you bow before your Heavenly Father in your family circle or in your secret places, contend for these gifts to be bestowed upon you? How many of you ask the Father, in the name of Jesus, to manifest Himself to you through these powers and these gifts? Or do you go along day by day like a door turning on its hinges, without having any feeling upon the subject, without exercising any faith whatever; content to be baptized and be members of the Church, and to rest there, thinking that your salvation is secure because you have done this? I say to you, in the name of the Lord, as one of His servants, that you have need to repent of this." (Ibid.)

How pleasing it is to witness unusual performance and to achieve outstanding levels of performance when conditions seem to have made it necessary for us to be average or losers because of surroundings, circumstances, or competition. We need to know how to motivate ourselves and others. I think of one of the greatest football coaches of all time. He wouldn't tolerate a losing attitude. He could often make his associates perform above and beyond their normal capacities. He had the gift of leadership. He wouldn't allow his team members to be down. Defeat was never part of the game plan.

I am impressed with the fact that God has made himself and others available to share these many gifts for our improvement and the benefit of the children of God. We are living in a day and a period of enlightenment when there is no time, reason, or occasion for anyone to justify labeling himself or herself with "I'm sorry--I'm doing the best I can under the circumstances." Often the limitations we place on ourselves are unfair, unreasonable, and unnecessary. Too often we hear people say, "Today is not my day," or "I'm one who is constantly unlucky." Too frequently we hear people excuse or justify their present situations with, "I just can't resist rich foods," "I know I find fault or criticize others constantly, but it's just part of my make-up," "It's difficult for me to keep a commitment. I don't seem to have the courage to stand firm when it really counts," "Being punctual is just impossible for me," or "I'm just not inclined to be friendly with others."

These are just a few examples of what we hear from those who would fault God for their lack of progress instead of loving him for his gifts that will help them to progress and attain happiness.

Miraculous powers are promised to those who will seek the gifts that are available from God, who humbly approach his throne continually for strength and powers above and beyond those that are natural to them. Those who approach their Heavenly Father with their needs will reap the benefits of spiritual gifts that can make the difference in their lives and the well-being of their associates.

We learn from section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants some of the gifts available to give us guidance, strength, and the power for self-improvement on a daily basis. Think of the gift of being wise and having knowledge; the faith to be healed; the faith to heal; the spirit of discernment; the spirit to prophesy and to speak with tongues; the interpretation of tongues.
What a glorious promise is in this section: "And it shall come to pass that he that asketh in Spirit shall receive in Spirit." (D&C 46:28.)

All of these spiritual opportunities are available to us according to our needs and according to those things which are for our best good. How wonderful it is to contemplate that through the gift of the Holy Ghost we may declare in firmness and truth that Jesus is our Savior, our Lord, and our Messiah. When we testify by the Spirit, we not only grow individually, but we can also touch the lives of others who will recognize the source of testimony and confirming powers.

President Harold B. Lee once explained: "The Lord, by revelation, brings thought into our minds as though a voice were speaking. May I bear humble testimony to that fact? I was once in a situation where I needed help. The Lord knew I needed help, as I was on an important mission. I was awakened in the wee hours of the morning and was straightened out on something that I had planned to do in a contrary way, and the way was clearly mapped out before me as I lay there that morning, just as surely as though someone had sat on the edge of my bed and told me what to do. Yes, the voice of the Lord comes into our minds and we can be directed thereby." (Stand Ye in Holy Places, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974, p. 140.)

Consider also what President Joseph F. Smith said: "I believe that every individual in the Church has just as much right to enjoy the spirit of revelation and the understanding from God which that spirit of revelation gives him, for his own good, as the bishop has to enable him to preside over his ward." (Gospel Doctrine, Classics in Mormon Literature Series, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986, pp. 34-35.)

One of my favorite examples of someone who lifted himself by the spiritual gifts and strengths that were available is Joseph Smith, who said, "I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women--all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty." (History of the Church 5:401.)

Parley P. Pratt's report of the Prophet's conduct on a challenging night has always been one of my favorite examples of greatness and rising above circumstances:

In one of those tedious nights we had lain as if in sleep till the hour of midnight had passed, and our ears and hearts had been pained, while we had listened for hours to the obscene jests, the horrid oaths, the dreadful blasphemies and filthy language of our guards, . . . as they recounted to each other their deeds of rapine, murder, robbery, etc., which they had committed among the "Mormons" while at Far West and vicinity. They even boasted of defiling by force wives, daughters and virgins, and of shooting or dashing out the brains of men, women and children.

I had listened till I became so disgusted, shocked, horrified, and so filled with the spirit of indignant justice that I could scarcely refrain from rising upon my feet and rebuking the guards; but had said nothing to Joseph, or any one else, although I lay next to him and knew he was awake. On a sudden he arose to his feet, and spoke in a voice of thunder, or
as the roaring lion, uttering, as near as I can recollect, the following words:

"SILENCE, ye fiends of the infernal pit! In the name of Jesus Christ I rebuke you, and command you to be still; I will not live another minute and hear such language. Cease such talk, or you or I die THIS INSTANT!"

He ceased to speak. He stood erect in terrible majesty. Chained, and without a weapon; calm, unruffled and dignified as an angel, he looked down upon his quailing guards, whose weapons were lowered or dropped to the ground; whose knees smote together, and who, shrinking into a corner, or crouching at his feet, begged his pardon, and remained quiet until an exchange of guards.

I have seen ministers of justice, clothed in ministerial robes, and criminals arraigned before them, while life was suspended on a breath, in the Courts of England; I have witnessed a Congress in solemn session to give laws to nations; I have tried to conceive of kings, of royal courts, of thrones and crowns; and of emperors assembled to decide the fate of kingdoms; but dignity and majesty have I seen but once, as it stood in chains, at midnight, in a dungeon in an obscure village of Missouri. (Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Classics in Mormon Literature Series, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985, pp. 179-80.)

A great leader of young women, a person who spent a majority of her lifetime encouraging youth and youth leaders worldwide to constantly better themselves, was LaRue C. Longden, a former member of the Young Women's general presidency. Ponder her words: "For almost too many years to count, it has been my beautiful privilege to tell our precious young folks and their leaders that 'It is smart to be a Latter-day Saint.' As my parting shot, may I again reiterate, it is smart to be a Latter-day Saint, for to be one we are privileged to be baptized and confirmed by proper authority which brings us into our Father's kingdom. Then, through our young men, we women share in our Father's greatest gift to his children, his priesthood, through which our worthy men may act in his behalf. In a day of turmoil, false prophets, worry, supposed lack of security and decision, I want to say once more with a voice loud and clear, 'I am humbly grateful to be a Latter-day Saint, for I know it is truly smart to be a Latter-day Saint!' " (It's Smart to Be a Latter-day Saint, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967, p. 112.)

Sister Longden conveyed the message that in some parts of our society today it is considered smart to do many things that detract from a person's spirituality. Immodest fashions, sexual freedoms, use of drugs and narcotics, selfish mediocrity, and rebellion against sacred things seem to be typical of the times. During a lifetime of active service she found that smartness truly comes through espousing the standards of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and carrying on regardless of peer pressure or conditions of the time.

Let us resolve this day that the phrase "that's just the way I am" will not be used as a crutch or excuse for lack of progress. Rather, let us use God's gifts and the example and strengths of others to live better today and hold on to principles that are eternal.