

Introduction

Christmas changes through the years. As you grow older, the traditions and celebrations are still important to you, but they take on a different feel. For example, when you grow older, you can't receive anything for Christmas that you can't afford. Even when you buy a gift for yourself, it is coming out of your pocket. When you are young, say 12 or less, however, opening presents is especially exciting because everything you get is outside your earning potential. If you don't get it for Christmas, you aren't going to get it. You can't get some of those big ticket items any other way. You surely do not have the money. So you ask for and hope for things that are completely beyond you and your earning power. You probably never got everything you were hoping for, but everything you got was more than you could buy for yourself. The gifts take on special excitement because not in your wildest dreams could you provide them for yourself.

This morning I want all of us to step into the shoes of a little child because the greatest of all gifts can only be received in that way. There is yet a gift that none of us can buy or provide for ourselves because its price is greater than the richest person in the world could afford. And it's the greatest gift that could ever be given. In our text this morning, the gospel writer, John, is declaring just what this greatest gift is. I want us to begin reading in Luke 2 (1-7). And then we will turn to John 3:16-18.

[Read Text and Pray]

Part of what I enjoy about Christmas presents is wrapping them. It is one of the few instances in which I feel just a little bit artistic. And who doesn't like to get a present all wrapped up with fancy paper and a beautiful bow? It makes you feel special. Well, the greatest gift ever given was wrapped up as well—not in fancy paper but in swaddling cloths. And it wasn't put under a Christmas tree in a beautifully decorated home but in a manger within the shelter of a cave which had become a stable for animals—not glamorous but incomparable to every other gift ever given. As we think about the gift of Jesus this morning, let's look at this gift in terms of what about it is so great. We are going to consider what John said about Jesus and wonder at the greatness of Him as the greatest gift ever given.

It starts with . . .

I. The Greatest Love.

The most special gifts that are ever given are not given because you have to but because you want to. Expensive gifts from people who don't love you may be nice but they don't mean as much. The saying, "It's the thought that counts," is true. If someone gives because they love you, that is the gift that plucks your heart-strings.

Do you know the short story by O. Henry? It is a heart-warming story of love. A young husband and wife, newly married and quite poor, desire to give each other a special Christmas gift. Della's prized possession is her very long and beautiful hair. Jim's precious treasure is his gold pocket watch. Della has saved her pennies but is far from affording the platinum fob for Jim's watch that she knows would mean so much to him. So she sells her hair to get just enough to buy the fob. When Jim arrives home Christmas Eve evening, he has a package for her. She opens it to reveal two beautiful combs for her long hair. She smiles and rejoices that her hair will grow out again. She then hands Jim her gift, the fob for his watch. Opening it, he sighs because he sold his watch to

purchase the two combs. The irony is overshadowed by the love that moved each to sacrifice something they loved to express a superior love for one another.

For him it doesn't matter that he no longer has his watch and for her it doesn't matter that she no longer has her hair. What matters is they know they are loved. They sacrificed to express it. And that is worth far more than if they had been able to afford something extravagant.

The greatest gift ever given starts with love. In John 3 Jesus is explaining to a man named Nicodemus, the most important matters in the history of the world. They pertain to being born again and entering the kingdom of God. Jesus explains that he has come to earth from heaven to be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so that those who believe in him might have eternal life. He is God's gift. And it all starts with love. John the Evangelist explains, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son."

God's love is the greatest love. The world is really mixed up about what is the greatest love of all. It is not learning how to love yourself but being loved by God. God is the greatest being there is, or has been, or ever could be. God is the Holy One who alone is self-existing, self-sufficient, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. God alone is God. For God to love is the greatest love there can be. Love describes who he is.

Now, it is no wonder that when we read the pages of scripture we find it said as it does in John 3:35 that the God the Father loves God the Son and as it does in John 14:31 that the Son loves the Father. The Father is altogether lovely. And so is the Son. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father because each is worthy of that love. In fact the infinite beauty and holiness of God demands that he be loved. It would be completely unsuitable for God the Father or God the Son or God the Spirit not to be loved. Let's think in food categories for just a moment. Think of a food that you LOVE. For me it could be lots of things. I am going to pick one—Thai coconut lime chicken from the Cheesecake Factory. Whatever it is for you, imagine it now. Put that food in your mouth and what do you do? You exude delight in that food. You love it because it tastes so good. That is the love of God for God. In this way God loves perfectly what God ought to love. Out of love for himself, God seeks his own glory. That love is completely understandable. It is the love with which we should love God. He is completely and absolutely worthy.

But the love of God here in John 3, the love from which springs the greatest gift of all time, is not the Father's love of the Son or the Son's love of the Father. It is God's love for the world. This is not a love that could ever be earned or deserved. This is God's love for what he has created. And more than that, it is a love completely ill-deserved. I mean it is a love for what deserves to be hated. It is a love for something despite the fact that it puts a BAD taste in your mouth. Paul expresses in no uncertain terms in Romans 1 that, the WRATH of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. God's love for the world is not a love because of the loveliness of the world, but is a love despite its wickedness.

This is the very reason John writes in his first epistle that we are not to love the world or the things in the world. But here again there is a difference in the intent of the word love. When we love the world, it is an attachment to the world that separates us from God. But when God loves the world, it is a love to redeem people in the world from out of the world to make them reconciled with him, not him becoming part of them! God loves us spectacularly while we were yet sinners against him. This is a conquering love, a merciful love of infinite proportions.

And the meaning of the word is important. To love means not a heart-sick swooning or desire but a determination to do another good. It is favor shown to another. The greatest gift ever given to the world finds its roots in the love of God. That God should love sinful human beings who defy his authority and defy his holiness is staggering. That you and I should be among those to whom God is determined to show kindness and favor despite ourselves is the greatest love imaginable for us. He is worthy to be praised and he is worthy to be loved.

God is also the model for our love in loving others. If we have been loved this way by the Lord, how can we not love others not because of who they are but despite who they are?

II. The Greatest Giver.

We not only see the greatest love here but also the greatest Giver. He can be the greatest giver because every resource there is at his disposal. In relation to creation all God can do is give. Everything that exists depends upon his giving it life or being. So God is the greatest giver because all he does is give. He cannot do anything other than give. If anyone or anything possesses anything, it is because God gives. If you have infinite resources, you can give whatever you want. You are not strapped by a budget. You can afford anything.

And God has given so that whoever believes in His Son has eternal life. We have earthly life as a gift from God, and we have every provision for living. He gives life and breath and everything needed to sustain life as long as we have it. But those who will believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God will have eternal life. What is eternal life? It is life without end. It is to live and never die. But in the scripture, eternal life is more than an extent of life. It is a KIND of life. It is abundant life. It is full and rich and satisfying. And there is a clear explanation for how this can be. It is such wonderful life because the essence of this life is to know God. Jesus himself defines eternal life this way: it is to know God. It is to know who he is. It is to know him as he is. It is to relate deeply with God. This is true life. And this is the gift God gives to those who will trust in his Son.

This gift of eternal life is also a rescue from what is deserved. The one who receives God's gift is the one who believes. And what he receives is the opposite of what he deserves. God is holy. Sin is an affront to such a one. It is hostility. It is a crime with legal demands for punishment. The punishment our sins deserve is to perish. It is to reap condemnation, punishment, the wrath of God. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of human beings. Perishing is not ceasing from existence but exposure to the relentless infliction of torturous pain as a penalty for committing sin. To perish is to lose all hope of relief from divinely inflicted anguish of soul and body. This is what every human deserves. For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. The wages of that sin is death. That death is depicted as a burning lake of fire. But the free gift of the greatest giver, God, is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord for those who believe.

III. The Greatest Gift.

Now God's gift of eternal life is not free. This is the costliest gift that has ever been purchased. The gift of eternal life itself is bought by another gift—the greatest gift there is. It is not a thing but a person. Jesus is God's greatest gift. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. He gave the gift of his only Son so that he could give us eternal life. Jesus is the greatest gift. In the story by O. Henry, each spouse gave up something in order to give a gift to the other. The cost for God to give to human beings life and salvation was the price of his Son.

This gift of his Son means two things. It means incarnation and it means crucifixion. It means life and it means death. It means that, verse 17, God sent his Son into the world. Just ponder this for a moment. This is the wonder of Christmas. The world was made through him, yet he came into the world. The eternal infinite God enters into the world as a human being. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit within the womb of his mother, Mary. He developed there. And in the fulness of time, he was born. So glorious a reality it is that angels could not keep quiet. He lived in perfect obedience to the law of God.

But God's giving of his Son means more than just incarnation. It also means execution. All we have to do is look back to the conversation Jesus was having with Nicodemus in verse 14. There Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Jesus is referring to the time when God sent a scourge of serpents upon the Israelites as a punitive measure for their rebellion. People were dying. God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and to lift it up on a pole. Those who were bitten could look upon the upraised figure and be healed of the serpent's venom.

On the cross Jesus took the form of those who deserve God's judgment. He was lifted up on the cross. God's gift of his Son is the making of him who never sinned to bear our sins in himself and suffer the wrath of God for them. And Christ was willing to suffer the reality of walking this guilty sod and hanging as a criminal upon a tree. He was wounded for our transgressions.

God the Father so loved the world that he gave his only Son. No more costly gift could ever be given. As Mary looked at the wonder of her infant son, she could not know that the sweet little hands that would grasp her fingers would one day be spread apart as nails were driven into them. But this was the cost of our salvation.

IV. The Greatest Response.

There are two possible responses to the greatest gift from the greatest giver prompted by the greatest love. The greatest of these is to simply believe. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM should not perish but have eternal life." There is nothing meritorious about believing. Those who believe do not deserve accolades. The greatness of the response is its consequence. Those who believe are not condemned but receive eternal life. The gift of eternal life comes ONLY to those who believe and specifically those who believe in the only Son of God.

I need to say a word about the nature of this belief. The word refers to the act of faith. "Believe" is the verb form of the noun faith. If you have faith in someone, you believe in them. To believe is to exercise faith. You exercise faith when you trust. It is more than being convinced that something is true. I can say I believe in George Washington, but it is far different from what I mean when I say I believe in Jesus. When I say I believe in George Washington, I am asserting that I am convinced of his historical actuality. I believe he was a real person, a great General, and so forth. But I do not trust in George Washington. I do not place any hope in George Washington.

A person who truly believes in Jesus trusts him. I place my faith in him. My hope for eternal life rests upon him and his accomplishments in living, dying, and rising from the dead. I could ask you if you believe a chair would hold you up were you to sit on it. If you said "yes," then you have expressed mental assent. But when you actually take a seat in the chair—that's when you are trusting in it because you are resting your weight in the confidence that it will hold you up. You trust in Jesus when you embrace him with the hope and confidence that he will save you from the wrath

you deserve for your sins. You embrace him as rescue from the condemnation which your sins deserve.

You may say you believe a parachute can save you if you were to jump out of a plane, but you exhibit faith in the parachute when you actually jump and pull the cord. You exhibit saving faith in Jesus only when you actually take up your cross and follow him. Don't take comfort if you merely believe the birth narrative of Jesus. Don't take comfort if you merely believe the accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. You can only take comfort in the work of Christ if you are specifically trusting in Christ Jesus by his life, death, and resurrection to save you. You have forsaken all other hopes. You forsake a hope that your good deeds will save you. You forsake the hope that you will be saved because your family is Christian or you go to church or practice religion. No name other than Jesus has been given among humans by which we must be saved. And the way to receive eternal life is to cast yourself completely on him. You take him to be your savior and you take him to be your Lord and King.

Those who express the greatest response to the greatest gift are those who believe. Are you believing in Jesus? Are you denying yourself to follow after him? Are you trusting, indeed clinging by faith, to the person and work of Jesus? If so, this is your confidence, you have eternal life. Even though you are a sinner and even though your sins demand God's wrath, there will be no condemnation for you. What Christ has done has satisfied the demands of justice on your behalf. You will not perish but have eternal life.

IV. The Greatest Tragedy.

"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

The greatest tragedy ever is for a human being to refuse to believe in Jesus. It is like having a gift under the tree with your name on it. The wrapping paper on it says, "this is the greatest gift ever." And yet you refuse it. You leave it there under the tree, and when you take all those decorations down, you throw it out with the garbage. It is like winning the lottery but refusing to go and redeem the ticket. Who would do a thing like that? Remember Naaman? The prophet told him he would be healed of his leprosy if only he would go and dip seven times in the Jordan River. He scoffed and almost did not go because he was offended at such a requirement. How tragic it would have been to have lived in leprosy simply because you didn't like the terms of healing! Yet may do not believe in Jesus because they do not like the terms of receiving eternal life.

The text is clear. You must receive this gift by believing in Jesus for it to actually become yours. Faith in Jesus is the only way to escape the condemnation we all deserve. The greatest tragedy is when a person refuses to believe. They are condemned already. They think believing is silly. No; they need to live a certain kind of life. No; they need to clean themselves up first; they will believe when they get their act together. But that will never happen. If you are waiting to be good enough or have your act together, you will never believe. Believe and God himself will do a work in you. He will start it, and he will bring it to completion. He will do what you cannot. But the greatest tragedy would be to refuse to believe. Because whoever will not believe will perish.

Conclusion

I don't know if you have opened Christmas presents yet or not today. But you could receive the greatest gift ever if right now you will believe on The God's only Son. If you have not already, I

hope you will not fail right now to receive the greatest gift ever given by the greatest Giver ever whose is the greatest love ever. If you have received this gift, then today is a special day for rejoicing and worship. And I hope that joy fills your heart and worship redounds in your soul. For there is therefore now no condemnation for those who by faith are in Christ Jesus! Have a truly MERRY Christmas!