

The Best Gift

Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis

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I. GIFTS AND GIVING AT CHRISTMAS

Christmas Eve, 2017. Can you believe it's already that time? What are your feelings about Christmas this year? I know Christmas can be wonderful for some, quite painful for others, and lots of places in-between for most people. Strained relationships with family members; memories of lost loved ones; having to spend Christmas alone while others are gathering with families; feeling worn-out and stretched to the limit after all the gift-buying and holiday parties and trying to make Christmas special for other people;...these and other challenges can make Christmas seem like not all it's cracked up to be for many people. But my prayer for all of us is that no matter what challenges or difficult circumstances we're facing this Christmas, we would each find encouragement and joy and hope this year in the best gift of all...the gift that's been given to every human being on earth and that makes all other gifts pale in comparison.

Did you know that there's one tradition of Christmas that's practiced almost universally around the world, even by those who don't believe in Jesus Christ? Of course, it's the tradition of giving gifts. Perhaps it was the history of the wise men from Scripture that started it. Though they most likely brought their gifts to Jesus when he was more than a year old rather than on the day of his birth, still the idea of them bringing gifts to the Savior seems to have inspired the universal giving of gifts on Christmas that has been part of virtually every Christmas celebration since then.

Are you excited about any gifts you hope to receive this year or that you're planning to give to someone else? The giving and receiving of gifts is certainly one of my favorite parts of Christmas. Take just a moment and think about your favorite gift giving or receiving moment. What's the best gift you've ever gotten at Christmas? What's the best gift you've ever given to someone else?

I can think of some really great gifts I've gotten on Christmas or given to someone else over the years, and I'm sure you can as well. But the extra special ones are

the gifts where someone has really thought about who I am and what I like and then sacrificed themselves in some way to get it or make it for me. And when you give a gift like that to someone else, don't you just love watching them open it? In fact, that's probably the best part of Christmas gift opening: watching others open a gift that you know they'll love and that will be really meaningful to them. My wife, Mindy, is really good at giving gifts like this and I know she really enjoys watching people open them. What Jesus said is so true: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (see Acts 20:35). And Jesus should know!

Well, what is truly the best gift ever given or received in history? A famous musician once offered her opinion on this question in a Christmas song and she got really close to the truth. She said:

*The best gift that I ever got
Didn't really weigh a lot
It didn't have a ribbon 'round
And it sometimes made a terrible sound*

*But best of all, it seems to me
It wasn't 'neath the Christmas tree
And yet, I guess I'd have to say
That it made all the other presents twice as gay*

*The best gift that I've ever known
I'd always wanted most to own
But in my dreams of sugar and spice
I never thought it could be so nice*

*The best gift that I ever get
Was sometimes dry and sometimes wet
Was usually pink, but oftentimes red
As it lay so innocently in its bed*

*The best gift of the year to me
The one I hold most dear to me
A gift that simply drove me wild
Was a tiny, newborn child*

Barbra Steisand was so close to right! What gift could ever be better than a living, breathing, baby child to love and raise as our own? Well, I'd say there's only one gift that could be better: A living, breathing baby child whose entire life and even his death is an unending gift of love to every human being in the world.

II. THE BEST GIFT AND WHY IT WAS GIVEN

The best gift...the One that's been given to everyone and which God Himself is longing to watch everyone open...is that tiny, newborn Child born so long ago in Bethlehem and laid in a manger...our Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 2, verse 20, described this Jesus as: "...***the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.***" Can you imagine a more meaningful gift? Someone who personally loves you so much that he actually gives his very life up for you. And this is an intensely personal love. Did you notice how Paul personalized the love Jesus has? Probably everyone in this room has heard John 3:16. Say it with me: "***For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.***" But Paul takes it a step further in Galatians and says that God not only loves the world as a whole, but loves people individually. He says: Jesus loved me; Jesus gave himself up for me. He didn't just love the human race as a whole, but he loved you and me personally and he gave himself up for you and me personally. This is truly the best gift we'll ever receive!

Well, many have wondered: Why did Jesus need to give us this incredible gift in the way he did, by being born as a baby and then allowing the human beings he loves to crucify him...killing the very One whose entire life is a gift of love to them? Why was his blood sacrifice necessary and why did it have to happen in this way? Well I believe the key to uncovering the reason is found in a statement Jesus made to the very people who eventually led the charge to crucify him: the Jewish religious leaders.

These leaders were what you might call "nit-pickers." They'd become so focused on keeping the law and sacrificing animals and following every jot and tittle of their precious traditions (and making sure everyone else did too), that they missed the main point of it all. The law and the animal sacrifices were not about earning salvation. Instead they were intended to show people their desperate need for God and lead them to trust God for the salvation only he could provide.

But the Jewish leaders could no longer see the forest for the trees. They had boiled it all down to just trying to keep a list of rules to impress other people and earn God's approval. But one day, as they confronted Jesus and his disciples about eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus challenged them to figure out what a simple statement God had made in the Old Testament truly meant. God had said this in Hosea chapter 6, verse 6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." Jesus was telling them a key truth they desperately needed to discover...a truth that also explained why the gift Jesus gave to us had to involve his death on the cross. The truth is this: *God's deepest desire and intention toward his rebellious and sinful human beings is to show them mercy and pour out on them his steadfast love.* But the only way a holy and just God, the righteous judge of the universe, can do this is by paying the penalty for sin himself.

You see, the Old Testament Law was intended to expose people's sinfulness so they would acknowledge it and reach out to God for the salvation and forgiveness they needed. The Old Testament animal sacrifices showed the necessity of a blood sacrifice to pay the penalty for sin and provided a temporary covering for that sin until the perfect, once-and-for-all sacrifice would be made by Jesus Christ himself. And God's ultimate desire in it all was simply to give us the best gift ever: the gift of his mercy and love and restored relationship with him, even though what we really deserve is his judgment and wrath for our sin...for living our lives as if he doesn't exist, when in fact our very life and our every breath right now is a continuous gift from him.

Listen to the words of 1 Timothy chapter 2, verses 3 to 6, which beautifully describe God's desire for you and I and the ultimate gift Jesus gave to accomplish it:

3 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

It was like this: through our foolish rebellion against our Dad we had ignored his advice and gotten ourselves kidnapped by a terrible criminal, who was now holding us for ransom. But the ransom he demanded for our freedom was the life

of our Dad himself. But our Dad loved us so deeply and so much, even though we had directly rebelled against him and done exactly what he said not to do, that he willingly paid the ransom by giving up his own life to set us free. Have you ever received a gift that compares with that?

Jesus paid the ransom to make our freedom possible and this is how Scripture describes this incredible gift he gave:

22 [JESUS] COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. 25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:22-25)

Though we were continually straying like lost sheep, through the gift of Jesus' life for ours, God made a way for us to return to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls. He's given every human being a gift, but just like the gifts under your Christmas tree, they need to be opened to be enjoyed. Scripture tells us that we open this incredible gift from Jesus by simply repenting of our sin and expressing our belief in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

III. THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

And when we accept this gift, you can truly say that it's the gift that just keeps on giving and giving. Let's unwrap together some of the beautiful gifts we receive through that simple repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ? The first is the free gift of eternal life.

Romans 6:23

23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

People in the world today would pay billions and trillions of dollars if they could find a way to live forever, but we get it for free. We get to spend eternity in the

presence of God himself, experiencing his steadfast love and tender care in a place beyond our wildest imaginations.

Secondly, we get the amazing gifts of forgiveness and peace with God. At the moment of salvation, all our sins, past, present and future are forgiven forever and we at last have enduring peace with our Creator. The apostle Peter said:

Acts 10:42-43

42 "And [Jesus] ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

And Paul said:

Romans 5:1-2

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

The gifts of forgiveness and peace with God are only opened in Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, we receive the gift of new spiritual life. Where previously we were dead in our sins, unable to please God, in Christ we are raised to new life spiritually. God recreates us at the heart level, enabling us to walk with him, know him and please him.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

Colossians 2:13-14

13 When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

The gift of new spiritual life.

Fourthly, we receive the gift of Christ's righteousness. We make what some have called, "the Great Exchange." And this is the best gift exchange ever! Here's how it works: we give Christ our sin and he gives us his righteousness. And nobody can steal it from us in this gift exchange!

2 Corinthians 5:21

21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The gift of being credited with Christ's righteousness.

Fifthly, we receive the mind-blowing gift of the Holy Spirit...God himself dwelling in us forever and providing his power and wisdom and strength right here and right now, every day of our lives.

Acts 2:38-39

8 Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."

The gift of the Holy Spirit...God with us always!

So far we've focused on the gifts we receive at the moment of salvation, though they stay with us as we continue in our lives. But how about the gifts Jesus keeps on giving us as we walk through life? We could go on and on about these continuing gifts, but I want to highlight just a couple of them today. First, is the gift of wisdom. In Christ, we receive wisdom from heaven. In Christ, our limited, earthly perspective is replaced with X-ray vision that enables us to discern good from evil, truth from lies, and truly understand the bigger picture of what's going on in life and the world all around us.

As we seek wisdom from God in his Word, guided by the Holy Spirit inside us, we find hidden in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. What a gift that is!

Listen to the words of Colossians 2, verses 2 and 3:

Colossians 2:2-3

...Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

And listen to how Paul describes the wisdom God gives to his people as they seek it in him. He says:

Ephesians 1:15-19

15 For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, 16 do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

The Lord gives us the gift of true and trustworthy wisdom from heaven as we seek it in Christ. This is truth is echoed by James:

James 1:5

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

Secondly, as we walk through life in relationship with God through Christ, we receive the continuing gifts of joy, peace and hope, no matter what difficulties we may face. Listen to what Paul says in Romans chapter 15, verse 13:

Romans 15:13

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you want true joy, peace and hope that even death can't take away? These are more amazing gifts given to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

And, my friends, the few gifts we've examined today, are just the beginning of the amazing gifts we'll receive in relationship with Christ throughout our lives and into eternity, from the best gift Giver in the universe...God our Father. Listen to what Jesus said about his gift giving abilities:

Matthew 7:7-11

7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 "Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? 10 "Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? 11 "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

The Father is, without question, the best Gift-Giver in the universe and the gift Jesus gave us through his life and death is truly the gift that just keeps on giving!

IV. THE GIFT WE HAVE TO GIVE

And do you know what else? We not only receive the best gift through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ, we also then have the best gift in the world to give to other people: *the good news or the gospel of Jesus Christ*. We have the privilege of giving this same gift we've received to other people, telling them the simple message of the gospel: *that through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, they too can open and enjoy this gift that just keeps on giving.*

Are you giving this wonderful gift to other people? I'll tell you that the devil loves more than anything to keep us from giving this gift to others. It's one of his main goals in fact. Misery loves company and his worst nightmare is when human beings actually open this gift and enjoy its amazing benefits. He knows that in this gift is found the actual power of God to free people from slavery to the devil and his purposes. He'll tell us that people will laugh at the simple message of the gospel or even at worse, at us. He'll tell us we're bad with words and will definitely mess up the message. He'll tell us that people will never believe it. He'll tell us that's the preacher's job. He'll tell us that it's just too difficult to bring

the topic up. He'll tell us we're way too busy. And on and on and on. The devil's very creative when it comes to lies.

But this Christmas and in this new year, let's believe and live our lives in God's truth. In both our words and actions, let's boldly say with the apostle Paul:

16 ...I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

(Romans 1:16-17)

Let's live our lives to give this best gift to everyone we can and pray that God will give them what they need to open it. And let's enjoy and praise God for all the benefits and blessings he continues to give us personally through the gift of Jesus Christ!

I want to close today, by offering this best gift to anyone here who hasn't yet received and opened it. Below you'll see a simple prayer you can pray to open the best gift God has given you through Jesus Christ. I'll give you a minute to quietly read it over and fully understand what you need to pray to open God's gift. And for those of you who've already opened this gift, I'd just ask you to quietly pray that God, by his Holy Spirit, would enable anyone here who hasn't yet opened this gift, to do it today...to come to true repentance of sin and saving faith in Jesus Christ.

If you're ready to pray that prayer today and open the gift God has given you through Christ, pray it quietly (or loudly) with me right now.

*God, I admit that I have sinned against You...
I turn from that sin right now...
I don't want to live my life that way anymore...
Jesus, I believe that you died on the cross for my sins...
And that you rose from the dead...
Right now, I put my trust in You alone for my salvation...
Jesus, You are my Lord and my Savior...My life is Yours...
Thank you for forgiving my sins and making me a new creation...*

*Thank you for giving me Your Holy Spirit and
adopting me as your child...
Teach me through Your Word how to live life with You...
Amen.*

If you prayed that prayer today and meant it in your heart, Scripture tells us that you are now a new creation and God's child forever. You've been forgiven of your sin and now have God's Holy Spirit living inside. You're at peace with God and no longer under his wrath. You now have the power to defeat sin in your life. In short, you've opened the best gift ever and it's going to keep on giving and giving forever.

Please tell somebody if you made that life changing decision today. Scripture tells us to confess with our mouths to God and others that Jesus is our Lord. I'd love to hear about it and so would everybody here! I'd also love to give you some materials to help you in your new walk with Christ. Let's close in prayer.