

SIGNS OF THE SEASON: III - CHRISTMAS GIFTS

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Isaiah 12:1-5

Luke 3:7-18

Well, I've made my list, and checked it twice, I figured out who's been naughty and who's been nice, and I've gotten all the gifts I'm going to give this Christmas, and have them wrapped and ready to go. How about you? I suspect some of you may be some of the people crowding the malls this afternoon and tomorrow to finish up your gift buying. It's that time of year!

It is truly, a most "wonderful time of the year!" For so many reasons, the most important, of course, being that it is the time we focus on the birth of the Savior of the world. But it's also a time of gifts, and that's what I want to talk about today - Christmas gifts.

When I think of Christmas gifts, my mind goes back to the days of growing up in a household with six children. It seems to me like there was a mountain of gifts in our living room every year. Now, we didn't have tons of money, because my father was a schoolteacher, and my mother a secretary - and neither of those jobs, in the sixties, paid a lot. But in spite of that, there were lots and lots of gifts. It was chaos when we all started in on them! Wonderful, magical chaos!

I learned recently about a woman who, even way back in her childhood, couldn't stand the suspense of waiting to see what she would get for Christmas, so she'd sneak around the house, find the gifts marked for her, slowly and carefully unwrap them to see what she was getting, and then slowly and carefully re-wrap them, and there was none the wiser! She did that clear through adulthood - her excitement over gifts couldn't be contained!

Besides receiving gifts, though, don't some of your most special memories about gifts center around perfect gifts you've given to people you love? As you get older, isn't that almost better than receiving wonderful gifts - giving the perfect gift that brings joy to someone about whom you care?

Now, before I go on too much about gifts, I know there's a lot of talk always about how commercial Christmas has become, and how we go way overboard, and how we spend extravagantly while so many people are in need. I understand that, and I hope we all think about those things before we do go overboard in our giving. I hope we do keep things in perspective.

But there is something about giving to others at Christmas, something really important. And that's what I want us to talk about together for a few moments this morning.

Unlike the two previous sermons in this series, I did not have to go to google for background information on the subject of giving gifts at Christmas. We all know why we give gifts at Christmas. It's because, first, we have all been given the greatest gift ever - the gift of a Savior - by God Himself.

When we (humanity), needed it the most, God sent His perfect gift. When we had turned away from God time and time again, when we had sinned and fallen short, when we wandered far away from Him - God gave us a gift to show us how much He loves us - and that gift was Jesus.

That Gift changed life utterly and completely from that moment on. That Gift loved us, lived with us, taught us, forgave us, challenged us, and died for us, that we might be free.

And He was a gift - truly a gift. We didn't earn that gift, there was nothing we could do to pay for that gift - it was a gift of God's amazing, unending grace - the gift of a Savior.

So, on the day of the Savior's birth, out of gratitude for the gift, and as a reflection of our joy for the love that was shared with us in that gift, we give gifts to those we love. That's the underlying reason we give gifts at Christmas - because we have first received the best gift of all - Jesus.

But let me break it down a little further this morning. I think that gift does something to us, something that enters into our own gift-giving.

First of all, the gift of Jesus calls for a response. And it is adoration and praise. Those at Jesus' birth offered that gift - the shepherds who left their fields and fell at His feet, the animals who offered what comfort they could, and most assuredly, the Wise Men who traveled from afar, and offered their precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. So moved were all of them by their encounter with the Savior of the world, that they gave their gifts with adoration and joy.

You know, sometimes I get a little annoyed at all the hoopla on the internet and in the media, when people get all exorcized over using Merry Xmas, instead of Merry Christmas. (I mean, X is the Greek symbol for Christ, after all.) What I wish they would get more exorcized over is leaving Christ out of Christmas period! Christmas is a celebration for one reason, and one reason alone - the birth of Jesus - so friends, respond with your gift of adoration and joy of Jesus! Do that before all

else - gifts, dinners, parties, family gatherings - before all that, worship the Savior born in Bethlehem. That's the best gift you can give at Christmas!

Not only does God's gift of Christ call for a response, but it also then compels us to give to others. In the Gospel lesson, John's words pretty much describe how to do that. He says, "share coats and food with those who have none." From day one, God's gift in Christ has compelled us to reach out and think of others, especially those in need.

That's what was behind the actions of one called St. Nicholas so long ago. You know his story, don't you? In 350 AD Nicholas, the Bishop of Smyrna, a kind, loving old gentleman started to go around every Christmas Eve, and give presents to poor children. He did it out of response to the love he knew from God in Christ Jesus. And look what happened because of him? For centuries now, Nicholas and his pal Santa Claus have blessed others with gifts.

In your gift giving, this year and every year, let the love of Christ compel you to care for others. Don't just give to those in your inner circle, but open wide your arms and your heart and give to those in need. We've had so many opportunities to do that already, but there are always more. And don't just do it at Christmastime, but let the caring ways of Christ compel you all year round.

I remember reading once about a little child who desperately wanted to get his mother a gift for Christmas, but he didn't have any money. Their family was really struggling financially, barely able to pay their bills, and the little boy knew he couldn't ask his mother for money. But he so wanted to get her something.

One day, he was walking down the street looking sadly at all the store windows filled with wonderful gifts that he could never buy, and just when he turned to go back home, his eye saw something glimmering on the sidewalk. It was a bright, shiny dime!

It wasn't much, but it felt like a million bucks to that little boy. He marched right into the first store he could find, but was crestfallen when the salesgirl told him there was nothing he could buy there for a dime. He left there, and went into the next shop, which was a flower shop. He waited patiently in line, and then when he got up to the counter, he showed the man his dime, and said, "This is all I have, but can I get just one flower for my mom?"

The clerk said, "Wait right here, for a moment" A couple of minutes later, back he came, holding a beautiful bouquet of a dozen long-stemmed roses tied together with a beautiful bow. He put them in a box, handed it to the little boy, and said, "That will be ten cents, young man."

The little boy handed him the dime with a look of disbelief on his face, and the man quickly said, "Oh, I just happened to have some roses on sale for ten cents a dozen today." As he went to the door to hold it for the boy as he left, he whispered, "Merry Christmas, son!"

All the while this was going on, the clerk's wife had been watching from the shadows in the back. When the boy had left, she said to her husband, "What was that all about?" With tears in his eyes, he said that when he saw that little boy it reminded him of himself when he was little. One Christmas he, too, had nothing with which to buy gifts, and a stranger had given him ten dollars - which felt like a million.

So when that dear little boy came in clutching only his dime, he was compelled to give him the precious gift of flowers for the one he loved.

Oh my friends, there are so many in need, all the time, not just Christmas. May the love of God in Christ Jesus compel us to give our gifts wherever and whenever we can.

So, after first responding with our lives to the gift of Christ, and then letting his love compel us to give to others, finally, may He inspire us in our gift giving at Christmas and always. We know, don't we, through the gift of Christ Jesus how much we're loved, how much God cares for us, how there isn't anything God wouldn't do or hasn't done for us? I believe that through our own gift giving we show much the same thing to those in our lives.

Think about all the shopping and gift selecting you've done this year. Don't you always try to show the persons who are receiving your gifts how you feel about them through those gifts? I hope so.

I think about some of the special gifts I've gotten throughout my life, and all of them were more than just the present, they were the thought, the love behind them.

I think of a gift my parents gave all of us six children. Each of us got a picture of them in a silver frame, but it was one of those frames that has a box behind it. And in that box my parents had put a veritable family tree of pictures. So you could flip through picture after picture of our ancestors from way back until current time. It was and in a precious gift, that says so much about the love and care of our parents for us.

And I think about a strange bottle of colored water that sits in my house. Anybody walking by it wonders what the heck it is, but it is precious to me. One day, my great-nephew Damien gave it to me. It's an old water bottle with the label removed, filled with blue liquid. He gave it to me and said, "It's like the water of

the ocean - to remind you of God who made it all.” I’ll bet he gave that to me four or five years ago - and still, to this day, when others go by, they think, “what the heck is that bottle of blue water doing sitting there?, while I think of Damien and I think of God. Precious gifts from precious givers.

One more gift that has shown me how much I matter to someone. It was my sister’s Christmas gift to me last year. We were sitting at her house opening our gifts, and I got to an envelope with my name written on it in her handwriting, and I opened it and read this: My gift to you is one night out for dinner every month of 2012 - just the two of us. And then, parenthetically, she wrote: I heard about this from a wise woman in a sermon.

You might remember that last Advent, I told the story of a father who knew that his daughter didn’t need another thing for Christmas - she had more toys and clothes and stuff than she would ever use. So what he gave her was the promise of an entire day each month that would be time for just the two of them.

So that’s what Susan was talking about, and this year has been wonderful. It hasn’t always been easy, but every month we’ve gone out by ourselves for dinner, and it’s been precious time. (I’m kind of crossing my fingers, that she’s going to give me the same present this year - although if she gives me a present with a bow on it, I won’t refuse it!)

You see, God’s gift of Christ to us, letting us know how precious and loved we are, does inspire us to let those in our lives know that as well. So, this Christmas and always, my friends, may you respond to God’s gift of Christ with the gift of your heart to Him; may it compel you to give to those in need; and may it inspire you to constantly find ways to tell those you care about just how precious they are to you.

May it be so.

Amen.