

The Meaning of Gift

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INTRODUCTION:

In one sense, the meaning of Christmas is about much more than “presents” or “gifts.” But in another sense, this is the only thing that Christmas means. Many Christians think they are on safe spiritual ground in sneering at all the “consumerism,” but even here, especially here, it is too easy to strain out the gnat and swallow the reindeer.

THE TEXT:

“Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness;) Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God. For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; Whiles by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men; And by their prayer for you, which long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you. Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift” (2 Cor. 9:10–15).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

God has placed us in a world that gives gifts, and has done so in such a way as to provide us with ongoing training. God is the one who gives seed to the sower (v. 10), and He does so with the intention of multiplication and increase. The result is bounty that leads to generosity, which results in thanksgiving (v. 11). Paul then speaks about the particular offering/gift he was administering, which resulted in thanksgiving (v. 12). As some Christians watch other Christians give, God is given the glory for a submission that comes from a confession of the gospel (v. 13), which leads to greater intercession (v. 14). And then Paul concludes with a thanksgiving that points to the headwaters of all of it (v. 15). Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift.

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS PRESENTS:

Of course, there were no Christmas presents, in our sense, in the Bible. At the same time, giving gifts as a celebratory gesture upon celebratory occasions is as natural and human as anything else we do—when we receive glad tidings, or even what we sinfully think are glad tidings, a natural impulse is to give gifts (Rev. 11:7-10). This being the case, we can gather some direction from the first Christmas presents.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (Matt. 2:11).

The Magi presented some very costly gifts to the Lord Jesus. This would have been remarkable for Joseph and Mary because we know that they were very poor. The offering they made in the Temple when Jesus was dedicated was an offering of two turtledoves (Luke 2:24), which the law allowed if someone could not afford the regular offering (Lev. 12:8). The gifts were striking, over the top, and outlandish. And so we have here a model for Christmas giving.

Now somebody is sure to point out that this presentation was an act of homage, and was actually a set of gifts to Jesus. Shouldn't our gifts—since it is His birthday—be gifts to Jesus, and not a frenzy of gift-giving to one another? Isn't this holiday just a grand celebration of selfishness? Well, it frequently is, but not because of the gifts. We tend to look at Christmas, and the gift-giving, through the wrong end of the telescope. We want to say, "Lord, when did we ever give you a tacky sweater with a moose on it?" But recall that the Lord teaches that we treat Him through our treatment of others (Matt. 25:40).

If you have a bunch of people giving gifts to each other, you could view the whole thing in light of what everybody was receiving—grabby, grabby, grabby—but for every gift received, somebody had to give it. But we still grumble. The people who give gifts are doing so under compulsion, we say, while those who receive them receive them gladly. People give because they are "guilted," and they receive because they are greedy. Or so we think. So also recall that a censorious heart won't quit just because the recipient is Jesus (John 12:5).

Apply that logic to our text and you see how for Christians the whole thing should fall apart. This is not because the logic of greed is impossible. And there are times when tight-fistedness might sometimes seem reasonable. But reflect on this—the logic of greed cannot function with generosity, thanksgiving, abundance, multiplication, increase, and gratitude. If overflowing generosity is automatically bad for sinners, then what on earth is God doing? Look at how He runs the world.

And always remember that greed takes two forms. One is the lust to be a receiver, and the other is the lust to not be a giver. And both of these use the existence of the other one as a reason for staying in their sin.

ENTIRELY GOOD:

We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). In the same way, we give because He first gave. When we give, we do so in circumstances that He created by His foundational gift. So one of our traditions associated with Christmas is the tradition of gift-giving. This is entirely a good thing, and we should do what we can to push it along. When it comes to the discipline of gift-giving, we need the training wheels. We need to have occasions that nudge us, prompt us, and urge us to give things away. As we accept these occasions, we are receiving an opportunity to become more like God, imitating Him. And as you imitate

Him, remember that you are imitating a generous wisdom, and a wise generosity. Do we honestly think that one of our spiritual problems is that of giving too much?

AN INEXPRESSIBLE GIFT:

The gift of salvation—a Messiah, a perfect sinless life, a sacrifice on the cross, three days in the tomb, resurrection in glory, ascension into Heaven, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on countless millions, and a promise to do the same for billions more—is a gift that cannot be put into words. The myrrh that the Gentile noblemen brought at His birth was a foreshadowing of the myrrh that a Jewish nobleman brought for Christ in His death (John 19:39). Nicodemus brought about a hundred pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes. We do not know what the ratio was, but one estimate says that myrrh cost about 4K a pound. Whatever the case, the Lord was with the rich in His death (Is. 53:9).

In this Christmas season, we are commemorating the time when God put His long promised deliverance into motion. As we give our gifts—whether in the offering, or to hunger relief, or as an anniversary present, or as Christmas presents, or as a gift out of the blue, we must do it as understanding that all of our gifts, every last one, is actually a subset of this great gift, this indescribable gift, this inexpressible gift. Here it is, two thousand years later, and every gift given, by every Christian, is another occasion for taking off more wrapping paper.



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