

Gifts – For All the Right Reasons!

Christmas Message

Colossians 3:1-5

Introduction

I believe the Lord has led me to speak as practically as possible today. After doing a lot of study on something else, I just set it aside because I believe the Lord wants me to address the issue of gift giving during the Christmas season. This does not make me feel very comfortable because I am much more comfortable researching and expounding a biblical text.

I will say a couple of things first, by way of introduction. If, when I am finished, you think that I do not enjoy anything about Christmas, then you have misunderstood. What I have to say does not cover every area of gift giving – I simply think we need to call for some discernment during a very chaotic and materialistic time of year.

I do want you to understand that I love this season, probably more than any other. It represents a lot of things to me, as I am certain it does to you – home going, exchanging of presents, family, certain traditions established at home, food. Of course, above all, the significance of it is the giving of the greatest gift to mankind – the person of Jesus Christ.

As part of this introduction, I will throw in a story that I heard a couple of days ago from my brother, who is also a pastor. He told me of a large church in his area that has just decided not to celebrate Christmas. They have an academy and decided to keep classes going all the way through December 24th, and then take only one day off. They are banning any kind of Christmas programs, Christmas trees, exchanging of presents, and such. I asked my brother, “Why?”

This church has stated several reasons for not celebrating Christmas. I will address them, not because we are going to try to answer every objection, but because these issues need to be addressed. You may not celebrate the Christmas season and we will give you that option, but we will address these issues. Let me give three of the reasons stated by this church for not celebrating Christmas.

1. The first reason is that the Catholic Pope designated December 25th as the date to celebrate Christ’s coming.

The December 25th celebration of Christmas then, is nothing more than the fact that it is related to Roman Catholic tradition, which is tainted with the worship of Mary and a Jesus who remains forever a baby or a dying Savior – never a risen Lord.

I studied and did a little more digging on this. The Pope did make it dogma, but reading a little further back in history, the entire western world had already been celebrating December 25th as the first advent of Christ’s coming for nearly a hundred years. Constantine was the first to make it an official tradition, as he tried to Christianize the world. So, although a hundred years later it was made dogma, it was a tradition that was already in place.

2. The second reason this church is giving is that the celebration of Christmas is really a cloaked repackaging of pagan worship.

This church says the Christmas celebration has to do with the pagan god Saturnalia. There is a celebration in the month of December for the pagan god Saturnalia, from the 17th to the 22nd. It has nothing to do with the 25th.

I will mention that there are a number of things that you may or may not be aware of, that we do that have some of the baggage of ancient paganism. We have given them specific and beautiful meanings.

One of these is the Christmas tree. Study its history and you may feel uncomfortable using one. However, read of the life of Martin Luther, the reformer, and discover that he took the tree, that was a symbol of pagan worship, and was the first to attach globed candles to it as a representation of the Light of the World who came and who we celebrate at this particular time of year.

This became the forefather of putting lights on Christmas trees, even to this day. Luther took something pagan and gave it special meaning.

We worship on Sunday, which is a pagan holiday during which pagans used to worship the sun god. It was called “the day of the sun,” and thus, Sunday, spelled “S – u – n”.

We have taken this pagan day, just as the early gospel writers did, and have given it the new meaning of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So we celebrate the sun day too, except we spell it, “S – o – n”.

3. The third reason this church is mentioning is that Jesus’ birth could not have been, as some suggest, in December because the biblical reference talks about shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night and we know that shepherds do not watch their flocks in the wintertime in Israel.

Perhaps the normal shepherds did not watch flocks in the wintertime, but the temple shepherds did. I studied this a few years ago, in fact, and found it interesting to discover that these particular shepherds were probably, since they were nearby, watching over the paschal lambs. They were temple shepherds and were watching over the sheep that would be used in the year-round sacrifices of the Israelite nation.

This makes it even more significant, when we consider the fact that Jesus Christ’s announcement came to shepherds who were watching over lambs to be used in sacrifices, as God came and basically said, “The Lamb of God has come, who will be the ultimate and the final sacrifice.”

The point, I think, is that Christmas provides a fantastic time to either ignore Jesus Christ entirely or remember Him in a significant way, just as we take communion and remember Him in a significant way. It does not mean that we should not remember His death year round or His resurrection Monday through Saturday.

I think, however, today, which is December 8th, presents a good time to raise some warning flags as we approach the craze of Christmas time. You know, as well as I do, that every day, from this day until Christmas, the shopping malls will be packed and jammed. I am going to be looking for a parking spot every once in a while myself – usually on December 24th!

I think Paul raised the flag, in principle, to the early believers. Turn to the book of Colossians chapter 3. This is a familiar passage of scripture, but let us relate it to the Christmas season.

Look at Colossians 3:1-5. In the first verse, the grammatical construction of the word “if” allows us to translate it, “since”.

Therefore if [since] you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things

above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.

Notice the Christmas reminder in verse 5 – we are to be dead to “greed, which amounts to idolatry.”

We can add to this, Romans 12:2, where Paul exhorts the believers to,

. . . not be conformed to this world . . .

The word “conformed” means “to be pressed into its mold”. We are not to allow our culture to change us.

I do not think there is any time of year that is more conforming than the Christmas season. We automatically get so caught up in it that we barely stop to think what it is all about.

Dangers of the Christmas Season

This leads me to present to you, what I believe to be several dangers of the Christmas season. I will follow this with positive elements of the season.

1. First, this season presents a theological danger.

It is important, even for godly believers, to keep riveted in their minds exactly what we are celebrating. It is the Savior’s arrival, not Santa’s. The significance of giving presents is directly related to God’s presentation of His gift; that is, the gift of His Son.

This is an attitude that should persist year round. When we give a gift to someone this season, it is basically an expression of gratitude to the One who gave the ultimate gift to us – the gift of salvation.

2. Secondly, there is a personal danger.

This is experienced by those who use Christmas as a time of impressing, rather than imparting. The world is impressed by what they have the buying power to accomplish.

I came across some facts, a couple of years ago, that are interesting. The *Guinness Book of World Records* has a list of gifts given during the Christmas season that hold a record for one reason or another. Let me give a few of these. They include gifts:

- for dad, a pair of mink-lined, ruby-tipped golf shoes, with gold spikes – if I wore them, they would not help my game a bit, but they cost \$8,800;
- for dad as well, an eighteen carat gold and platinum fountain pen for \$4,250 dollars;
- for mom, a diamond-studded dress, with 512 diamonds to be exact, designed by Serge Lepage for 1.5 million dollars;
- for mom also, a spoon for display, made in Vienna in 1905, for \$26,400;
- for son, a unique gift of an Alaskan Indian clan hat made of wood for \$66,000 dollars;
- for daughter, a bathtub made entirely of gold for 5 million dollars – as if she needed a reason to stay in there any longer!

Newsweek adds to the list with record-setting gifts for children. I came across this recently. These include:

- a ranch mink coat for \$2,500;
- a gold-plated carousel music box for \$12,000;
- a battery-powered Ferrari Testarossa Junior, capable of doing 28 miles per hour, for \$14,500.

Also being advertised this season from New York is the Christmas gift that beats them all – buy your child the birthday party of a lifetime. When your child’s birthday rolls around, you can buy this gift that includes:

- air fare to New York City;
- lodging at the Plaza;
- a horse drawn carriage ride through Central Park.

And the cost is only \$18,000!

This is what we call the Christmas craze.

Now gifts are all relative – some people can buy these gifts as easily as you and I could go shopping at J.C. Penny. However, I think, as one man wrote, that this craze is taking place in the lives of people who are trying to silence a guilty conscience from the previous eleven months.

This leads to the next danger of this season.

3. Thirdly, there is, in this season, a psychological danger.

According to psychology reports that I have read, Christmas is the loneliest time of year, not only for single people, but for family people as well. In fact, the month of December holds the record for the highest number of suicides nationwide.

Why? It is obviously an incredibly stressful month; a hurried time that has absolutely no meaning

to an unbeliever. When life is boiled down to what really matters, it is relationships – a relationship with God and relationships with others.

Once all the wrapping is put in the trash can and the tree is taken down and put out on the street to be picked up by the garbage collector, December 26th is unbearable for a lot of people. A lot of people set themselves up.

4. Fourthly, as we have already implied, there is a financial danger.

We have to ask ourselves some hard questions; such as, “Is this within my budget? Is this gift appropriate? Does it say what I really want it to say?”

According to the Social Security Administration, only two percent of Americans reach age 65 financially independent. This does not sound surprising and, in fact, I would expect it to be even lower. However, one fact that I came across that stuns me is that according to the Social Security records, 85 out of 100 Americans have less than \$250 at the age of 65!

I think one of the greatest thieves is this season. People sacrifice their tomorrow on the altar of today. They buy and buy and buy and then, they pay it off for the rest of the year. Now obviously, that may not be the only reason, but I think it is one of them.

Biblical Model for Gift Giving

I want to focus the remaining time that we have on this great challenge of gift giving. Let us discover a solution and gain discernment by understanding the biblical model for giving gifts.

By looking at the early Christmas story, we will discover that that first Christmas was a flurry of exchanging gifts; of gift giving. There are five gifts that I will mention today. Some of them are tangible; some of them are not.

1. Number one, God gave the gift of honor to common men.

I mentioned the shepherds earlier, but did not mention that because of their occupation, they were religious outcasts; they were unable to worship in the temple because they were considered unclean by their world. However, God gave the announcement of His treasure come to earth, not to the religious pietists or scholars, but to a bunch of dirty shepherds out on the field. These shepherds were not even able to worship in the temple on the coming Sabbath day, but God came to them. What a gift this was – the gift of honor to common men.

2. Number two, God gave the gift of a Savior to all the world.

I think this season should bring an even greater awareness of the lost world in which we live and the reason Christ came. Jesus said He came,

. . . to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19:10)

3. Number three, God gave the gift of peace to all who believe.

This is peace, not to all nations, but to men who are of goodwill. God gave peace to the human heart that receives Him as sovereign.

4. Number four, the wise men gave gifts symbolizing aspects of the Messiah's life.

You may have studied this or heard of this in the past. The gifts of the wise men were more symbolic than they were tangible or financial, and I am certain they did not expect anything in return.

- Their gift of gold was, in the ancient world, a symbol of nobility or royalty.

We do not know how much gold they gave, but when they presented gold to Jesus, they were recognizing His nobility; they were recognizing His deity.

- Their gift of frankincense, which they probably handed to Mary or Joseph, rather than Jesus, was very significant as an element used in temple worship to symbolize sinlessness.

Frankincense was attached to the meal offering of thanksgiving and praise in temple worship. It could not be used with anything related to sin in the temple.

Jesus Christ, in John 8:46, said,

Which one of you convicts Me of sin? . . .

They remained speechless.

This gift of frankincense was the prophetic announcement of the wise men as they gave it to baby Jesus. It was symbolic of the fact that this One was going to be sinless.

- Their gift of myrrh, which was an expensive spice, was also a very significant gift in that it was used specifically for embalming the dead.

Myrrh was used by Nicodemus when he embalmed Jesus, as recorded in John 19:39.

Myrrh was also mixed with drink to provide a sort of narcotic to deaden the pain. This was offered to Jesus Christ on the cross (Mark 15:23).

This particular gift spoke of the fact that Jesus would die, and it would be a horrible death.

These three gifts that were given to Jesus by the magi, were very significant.

5. Number five, the shepherds and the wise men gave God the gift of worship.

All of these gifts are impossible to measure in significance and value. This is the model that the Bible presents to us of gift giving.

Types of Gift Giving

Now there are several ways that we will give this Christmas. Let me suggest several and expose, not only ourselves, but the world system in which we live.

1. The first, we will call, the "tit for tat" present.

This gift is motivated by a desire to smooth out the bumps of life.

It is the kind of gift an employer gives to his employees. He is not expecting anything in return, but is certainly hoping it will increase productivity and cut down on the back talk in the office.

This is the kind of present that feeds the cash registers throughout the rest of the season.

It is the kind of gift a parent may give a child because of a guilty conscience from not spending time with him or her during the year.

This gift will hopefully smooth out the bumps. It is a kind of apology wrapped in Christmas paper.

This is the kind of gift a spouse will give as an apology, motivated by the desire that this will hopefully return some of the sparkle or the romance that was not there in the previous eleven months.

This is a "tit for tat" present. The motivation for this kind of gift is guilt.

2. The second gift, we will call, the "gift for a gift" present.

This gift is even more common. This is the present that is carefully measured against what the giver expects to receive. It is a silent game we all probably play, especially in larger families.

This type of gift feeds the cash registers all the way through December 31st. It prompts the last minute dash because, "Oh my goodness, I forgot . . ." or "They gave me . . ." or "What was the cost of that? Twenty-five dollars. Okay, I'll go do likewise."

The motivation for this kind of giving is pride. We do not want to be caught short; we want to make sure all the bases are covered. This is not a very good motivation for giving.

3. The third gift, we will call, the "duty for ceremony" present.

This kind of present is given just because it is Christmas time. It is culturally the time to exchange gifts. We certainly do not want to be just receiving gifts, although some of us might like to have it that

way! We would also like to be giving gifts because that is cultural.

Little or no thought or emotion is invested in what is given, it is just done to get this thing over with. It is that time of year.

The primary motivation for this gift is tradition.

Most of the gifts that will be given are given for these three reasons.

4. The fourth gift is God's model and we will call it the "grace" gift.

This type of gift will take your own creativity and thought – it will take something from yourself.

There are two very important characteristics of grace gifts.

- First, it is impossible for grace gifts to be measured in dollars.

When you give or receive a grace gift, you are suddenly in the presence of something too immense to be repaid – it can only be received. It may be something handmade or it may be something purchased, but it has great significance emotionally.

- Secondly, it is impossible for grace gifts to be repaid in dollars.

Now, I am not saying that you cannot buy or trade or whatever to get the money for this gift, but I am challenging you to give gifts that are self-created expressions. These are gifts created by the heart; by love. Love is the primary motivation of grace gifts – and this models God.

Why do grace gifts model God? Because He created the gift of salvation that He gave to us. So this season, we should put some time and thought into ways to give a grace gift to a family member, to a friend, to someone in the church.

Grace Gift Ideas

Let me give seven ideas for grace gifts. These are not profound. I just took some time to think of these and I am sure you can come up with many more.

1. Number one, the gift of togetherness.

This gift is the gift of time spent with the recipient. Take your child, your spouse, or a dear friend out on December 25th, or after the 25th. I think the most precious commodity in our busy society is time. Give someone that gift.

2. Number two, the gift of listening, which comes on the heels of the gift of togetherness.

Why not give this gift to someone who lives alone? Go to visit them and really listen, not waiting for a chance to interrupt or give your point of view, not sitting there day-dreaming, planning your

responses, but just listening. It would be a rare treasure.

3. Number three, the gift of affection.

During this season that is marked by the love of God, be generous with hugs and with the words "I love you," among family and friends. These seemingly small actions may be what someone, even in your home, is starving for.

4. Number four, the gift of a compliment.

This is a simple gift, but is usually in short supply around the church and in the family.

It might come in the form of, "I'm proud of you," or "I'm glad to have you as my friend."

It may be verbal and as simple as, "You look good in blue." Make sure you speak the truth – they may wear it again!

It may be as deep as, "I appreciate your ministry to children."

It is surprising how seldom this is done.

5. Number five, the gift of service.

I have enjoyed, with a mixture of embarrassment, the unexpected gift of someone's service at times. Have you experienced this too? I am sure you have.

It may be the gal next door bringing over a loaf of homemade bread or someone showing up to do something around the house. You kind of stand there and think, "Should I help?" You volunteer and they say, "Oh, no, no, that's okay."

This gift is hard to receive, but wonderful to give. Perhaps there is someone that you can minister to. It may be carpooling, babysitting, calling, going over to fix something around the house. It may be doing the dishes or taking out the trash. Did my wife put that in or did I? It is my writing! The gift of serving is a precious gift.

6. Number six, the gift of play.

Offer to play your loved one's favorite game. It may be their favorite because they always beat the socks off of you when they play it.

There is no gift like companionship and laughter with close friends or family or even with someone you have never met before. In church, perhaps you sat by them and just got to know them, and said, "Come on over and let's spend some time together."

7. Number seven, the final one I will suggest, is the gift of prayer.

Why not pray for the people on your Christmas list – and let them know you are praying for them. They may stutter for something to say in return because it marks them. It is a way of saying, "You

are so special to me that I am talking to God about you.” This is quite a gift.

Conclusion

December days can be rich and filled with grace gifts that cannot be paid back. These gifts are, in a sense, one time offerings by the giver, who is modeling the gift of God to us. A price tag cannot be attached to these gifts – their value is priceless.

Put some of these gifts on your Christmas list. We know that after a couple of months, the other things we have purchased may be forgotten, or broken, or out of date, or no longer fit, but grace gifts will continue to create the memory of love expressed.

When Richard Burton was married to Elizabeth Taylor, he gave her one of the largest diamonds ever set. Every newspaper covered the story and gave the details of the color, and the weight, and the cut, and the price. For a few days, everyone marveled, “Wow! What a gift!” However, it is interesting that, even though it was, I believe, the most expensive diamond ring ever given to someone, this gift was still describable.

I think of Paul’s words in II Corinthians 9:15,
Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

Now many of the gifts we are going to give this season may, in fact, be purchased, be practical, be needed. Let us not abandon the kind of gifts that are expressions of our own thought and our own love. These are grace gifts. They are not motivated by tradition. They are not motivated by guilt. They are not motivated by pride. They are motivated by love for the individuals who receive them. When we do this, we model God and the way He gave, not for pride’s sake or tradition’s sake or guilt’s sake, but for love’s sake – He sent His Son to you and to me.