

The Perfect Gift

Luke 2: 1-7

12 06 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Here are the two most popular questions of the holiday season: “*Are you ready for Christmas*” and “*What do you want for Christmas?*” The first question deals with what we are giving and the second with what we are getting. It may be more blessed to give than receive, but BOTH actions are filled with peril. What if you give or get the wrong gift? So we spend hours making our lists and checking them twice.

I polled staff members about their worst Christmas presents EVER. Responses included: a box of socks, a Shetland pony that bit, a life-sized David Cassidy jigsaw puzzle, and—my personal favorite—a live Billy goat that had to be transported in the family car across state lines.

When I was 10 years old, my grandmother gave me a velvet and fur coat for Christmas. I wore it one time for her approval before hiding the coat in the closet. If I had worn it outside, every boy in the neighborhood would have beat me up!

What’s the worst present you ever gave or got: What do you REALLY want for Christmas?

I. Christmas Vacation

PP4 CHRISTMAS VACATION (MOVIE)

One of the more “memorable” movies of the holiday season is *Christmas Vacation*. The film premiered in December 1989 with Chevy Chase starring as **Clark Griswold**. As a husband and father, Clark is often in error but never in doubt. Despite his failings and failures, however, Clark always has his family’s best interests at heart.

Clark attempts to create a memorable holiday for the Griswold family. He envisions a picture-perfect Christmas with snow, decorations, family, food, and fun. However, the dream quickly becomes a nightmare. The gigantic Christmas tree bursts through the living room windows. The light-covered house threatens to burst into flames. A Teflon coated sled almost sends Clark to the hospital. The in-laws constantly bicker. And you don’t even want to know what happens to the cat!

Clark Griswold bounces back from each disappointment like a child’s punching bag. When his long-awaited Christmas bonus finally arrives in the mail, however, even Clark’s optimism suffers a severe blow.

You see, Clark had planned to give his family a surprise gift! He had ordered an in-ground swimming pool to be installed that spring. Banking on his bonus check, Clark had already written a check for the down payment with insufficient funds in his account. However, the annual bonus turns out to be a subscription to a *Jelly of the Month* club. All of his plans for a perfect Christmas had seemingly been ruined.

II. Christmas Commercialism

Clark Griswold had the best of intentions but made the worst of mistakes. He focused upon doing everyTHING just right—but discovered that **THINGS** don't make the season merry and bright.

This is a common mistake during the holidays. We want the best for family and friends—along with a little something-something for ourselves. There's tremendous pressure to give and get just the right gift. We dread those moments when our efforts go awry; but even the best presents only satisfy us for a time.

Each December news reporters warn the public about the dangers of swindlers who take advantage of people. However, **commercialism** is the biggest scam of the holiday season. It will take your Christmas cash and spirit quicker and slicker than any con artist. Consumerism gladly makes promises that it has no intentions of keeping.

New and improved. Bigger is better. More is best. Buy these products and you will possess white teeth, fresh breath, clear skin, mega-pixels, faster downloads, larger screens, true meaning, endless love, and eternal bliss. Open a charge account, and it's an additional 20% off personal happiness with no payments until 2011.

Materialism seductively whispers, "If you buy THIS thing for family and friends, then they will be satisfied. If you get THIS thing, then you will be happy." However, materialism is a bankrupt philosophy with two disappointing principles:

- 1) The **salted peanuts' principle**. We always want just one more. But the next one will be the last one. Or the one after that We always hunger for MORE.
- 2) The **law of diminishing returns**—it takes more and more to satisfy less and less. And after a while, our materialistic addiction doesn't make us feel good but simply keeps us from feeling bad.

We never seem to learn as consumers. We are like Charlie Brown in the *Peanuts* comic strips. Lucy offers to hold the football so that Charlie Brown can kick it. From past experience, he KNOWS better! Yet Charlie Brown allows Lucy to convince him otherwise. He runs towards the ball, throwing his body and soul into the kick. And just before toe meets leather, Lucy yanks the ball away, and Charlie Brown falls flat on his back—again.

III. God's Gift to Us

Some well meaning Christians believe we should do away with Christmas presents altogether. They complain that commercialization and materialism have robbed the season of its true meaning. They attempt to promote a simpler lifestyle. I certainly sympathize with their sentiments. Christmas is about our Savior and not a sale, a manger and not Macy's, Bethlehem's babe and not a bargain.

However, I would disagree with their basic assumption. **Christmas really is all about presents**. Our giving and getting are inspired by God himself. Like small children imitating our parents, we reflect God's love when we give and receive.

In Bible studies and sermons, I have heard leaders refer to the wise men's gifts to the baby Jesus as the first Christmas presents. They are wrong. The very first Christmas

gift ever given was by the Lord God Almighty. “*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*”

A young child once had the part of the herald angel in a church Christmas play. When his big moment arrived, he forgot his one line. Finally, he blurted out to the shepherds: “**Boy, have I got news for you!**”

It is good news of great joy to all people. For born to us today in the city of David is a Savior who is Christ the Lord. In a lowly manger, God gave himself in love. The gift came wrapped as a baby in swaddling clothes. Now that’s gift giving by the Master Gift Giver himself! We did nothing to earn or merit such a marvelous, miraculous present. God gave us such divine love anyway.

Grace is the theological name for it: a gift freely given. It reveals the spirit of the Giver: our God who is head over heels in love with His creation. For God so loved the world, he gave. For God so loved you and me, he gave. For God is love. God whispers to us in each carol and candle, in every kindness and crèche, “*I love you!*”

We are also called to be **regifters**. Our heavenly Father invites us to regift love. As God has loved us, we are in turn called to love others. We give because we have **received**. We love because God first loved us. What we get, we are then called to give. When asked to identify the greatest commandment of all, Jesus answered, “*Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.*” Then he continued, “*And the second is like unto the first: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

Jesus links our love for God and love of others. To do one is to do the other. To profess one means we must practice the other. Any material gift we give is but a poor excuse for the sentiment behind it. The best present of all is love.

Jesus said that his disciples would be recognized by their love. We instinctively understand this truth. The holidays can bring out the best in us. Many here have been involved in a variety of outreach efforts during the past weeks: Bartow Christmas, ringing the bell for Salvation Army, Operation Shoebox, Angel Tree, etc.

Rather than looking for meaning in the things of this world, we discover true meaning in God’s kingdom. Search for real meaning in a world that offers so many counterfeits. Seek first God’s kingdom and all other things afterwards. Kneel at the side of Jesus and let all other things fade away in importance.

IV. The Pearl of Great Price

Once upon a time a young man was wandering aimlessly through the mall, randomly pausing to stare through the storefront windows. The displays boasted an extravagance of merchandise that would have embarrassed King Solomon with all his riches. The shops offered every product imaginable and a few inconceivable; but nothing seemed quite right.

The newlywed had only been married a handful of months. December twenty-fifth would mark the couple’s first Christmas together as husband and wife. He sought just the right gift for this most special of occasions. The man envisioned a present that would bring tears of joy to his beloved’s eyes. He yearned to hear those magical words,

“Oh, you shouldn’t have! It’s JUST what I’ve always wanted!” With Thanksgiving already past, the December days were slipping away like hourglass sand. His leisurely perusal of possible presents had become a desperate search.

Truthfully, he did not enjoy the best track record for gifts to his better half. Sharing the perennial dilemma of all men, he simply did not understand what his wife wanted. The toaster oven for her engagement present went over like a Gremlin in an antique car show. The Valentine’s gift of a complete fly fishing rig, including all the materials needed to make one hundred handmade flies, rested unopened in a hall closet. And the newlywed still shuddered when he remembered forgetting his wife’s last birthday!

So the heat was on, and he found himself in the high pressure cooker of marital bliss. The young man encouraged himself to loosen up. After all, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. No pain, no gain. No guts, no glory. Yet none of the maxims of his athletic days seemed to apply in this particular situation.

He sat dejectedly on a mall bench and sighed. Leaning back wearily, he idly wondered if his wife’s second husband would do any better in the gift-giving department. He gazed wearily at the jewelry store in front of him. Then he saw IT!

A single **pearl** attached to a gold necklace nestled on a black velvet pad in the display case. The marble sized orb measured at least fifteen centimeters around. Unlike its distant cousins with white, ivory, and black hues, the lone pearl shone with a golden hue. He approached the window in a trance and stared in rapture. When he finally focused upon the price tag, it possessed more digits than his telephone number!

The miserly Scrooge within him weighed the exorbitant price against his anemic bank account. Then a vision of his bride’s face filled his mind. He walked resolutely into the store and beckoned a clerk whose Christmas commission wishes soon came true. The young man maxed out every credit card in his wallet along with all his cash and a few gold fillings; but he left the store with a small velvet box gift wrapped in holiday paper.

Christmas morning dawned bright with God’s promise. The young husband waited breathlessly while his bride unwrapped the small gift box. Her sudden intake of breath said more than a thousand words. She clung tightly to his neck as tears of joy streamed down both their cheeks. Then he heard her say, “Oh, you shouldn’t have! It’s JUST what I never knew I wanted!” In that moment, the pearl’s value appreciated from expensive to priceless.

Jesus told his followers: *“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”* (Matthew 13: 45-46)

Conclusion

We live in a material world. And it is natural mistake to expect material things to bring meaning, purpose, and joy into our lives. However, we are expecting something from the world that it was never designed to do. If you want everyTHING to be perfect for Christmas, then you will be greatly disappointed. But when we swim upstream against the cultural stream and focus upon God, then we discover the real meaning of the Christmas season.

<i>The world says:</i>	<i>The kingdom of God says::</i>
➤ Get	give
➤ More	less
➤ Hold tight	let go
➤ World	Spirit
➤ Things	faith

There's a little bit of Clark Griswold in each of us. On occasion, we all believe the right gift given or received will make the season merry and bright. Then we discover once again that no THING can ever fill the emptiness within.

I cannot promise a Christmas vacation that is a picture-perfect, Currier and Ives holiday with a trimmed tree, white snow, fast sleds, bright lights, perfect presents, and a happy family. But then that's not what Christmas is all about.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things—including a joy filled Christmas—will be yours as well.