

## Give with the Generosity of Christ

**Sermon Scripture: II Cor. 9:6-15**

**Worship Scripture: Matthew 2:9-11**

This morning I want us to consider how we can bring out the flavor of Christ in the oldest of all our Christmas traditions . . . gift giving.

We trace the whole idea of giving gifts in honor of Jesus' birthday back to those wise men from the east. As Matthew records the story, when the magi arrived (perhaps as much as two years after Jesus was born), they fell down at his feet in adoration. Their worship culminated in tangible expressions of their devotion: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. No sense of obligation, just desire. For them, giving was truly as spiritual experience.

The gifts they gave were symbolic as much as they were costly or practical. They symbolized faith. They symbolized love.

Even though the wise men are the first to give Christmas presents, they are not the first to give gifts. For wherever there is authentic love, by definition there are gifts.

We cannot read scripture without detecting that giving is the only appropriate proof of one's love for another. "For God so loved the world that he gave. . . ." "For the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. . . ."

That's the heart of the gospel. God so loved, he gave. I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for each other.

That is why the apostle Paul invests as much ink as he does addressing the topic of giving. He assumes the Corinthians understand that giving to others is a core value of those who have been recipients of gifts born out of God's love.

Here's the context. The Jerusalem church is in need of financial help. Persecution by the Romans and the Jews has taken its toll. Many of the faithful have fled. Many of the original leaders are now dead. What once was a thriving fellowship has fallen on hard times. Paul began to write to churches throughout the empire, soliciting funds on behalf of the Christians in Judea. The congregation in Corinth initially got caught up in the spirit of the appeal and promised to generously participate. Months (if not years) have now passed, and the enthusiasm that prompted their early pledges is sparse.

Paul calls on the Corinthians to rekindle their spirit of generosity. In verse 6, he not only quotes from a familiar Jewish proverb, he also echoes the words of Jesus . . . the measure you use in giving will be the measure you will receive. "Remember this," he writes, "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

From verse 6 to verse 15, Paul uses the word generous six times. As far as he is concerned, when Christians are given the opportunity to express love through the tangible act of giving, they are to be generous. The way we give is a reflection on the one whose name we carry. Christ generously gave to undeserving individuals like us, so those of us who are called "little Christs" are called to do the same.

Paul also makes a case for the joy of giving. "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Giving by definition is a voluntary act.

There is genuine joy in giving when you are not held hostage by others expectations or demands, but are free to act on the desire you have to extend tangible kindness to another.

In the chapter of 2 Corinthians that precedes our scripture reading, Paul describes how Jesus in coming to earth divested himself of his divine wealth and became poor that through his poverty we might become rich. The apostle holds up the Macedonian Christians as followers of Jesus who reflect his extravagant self-sacrifice. They had little to start with but gave the little they had to help the needy congregation thousands of miles away in Jerusalem. Our text for today ends with a reference to God's gift to us at Christmas. Jesus is God's indescribable gift. It is so unexpected, undeserved, and unparalleled that no other adjective seems appropriate. Indescribable . . .

Some folks don't always have the option of spending Christmas with loved ones. WE need to Convey Christ's generosity by offering the gift of hospitality to those who may be longing for company.

Ask the Lord to open your eyes to those in your church or neighborhood who will be alone this Christmas season. And when extending invitations, ask your guests to bring a little Christmas along--a word about their own traditions, a batch of cookies, or a favorite ornament with an explanation of why it is special. Perhaps this is the kind of gift you've never given before, but it can be a godsend to those who would otherwise be lonely.

As you see, when we take our cue from Paul's instructions to the Corinthians, we aren't so concerned with what we give as we are with the attitude with which we give and how much of ourselves we give as an expression of his love. The non-tangible gifts can be the most important gifts of all.

Wayne Messmer For two decades, the 49-year-old Messmer has been the public address announcer and national anthem singer for sports teams in the Chicago. A few years back this one who sings of the land of the free and the home of the brave experienced freedom and courage in a profound way.

After singing the Star Spangled Banner at a Chicago Blackhawks game in 1994, Messmer was shot at point-blank range by two teenage boys. Because the bullet passed through the singer's throat, the doctors who operated on him were unsure if he'd ever sing again. Amazingly, six months later (still bearing evidence of his 10-hour surgery), Messmer returned to the microphone.

Physical healing was one thing. Emotional release of the hatred and resentment he felt was another. Because of his personal faith in Jesus Christ, Messmer was convinced that his emotional healing was hinged to his ability to forgive his young assailants.

In his book, *The Voice of Victory*, Messmer writes: "In spite of my frustration I believed I had reached a point where I could honestly say that I had forgiven these young men. In doing so, over a period of contemplative and reflective prayer and meditation, I was confident that I had set myself free from the chains that had connected me to the incident."

Although one of the boys had been released on a plea bargain, James Hampton remained incarcerated. To prove to himself that he truly had forgiven his would-be killers, Messmer drove the 225 miles to the Galesburg Correctional Center and asked to see young Hampton.

Although several years had passed, and Hampton had passed from being a teenager to an adult, Messmer found the strength and grace to speak these words, "James, I'm here to see how you are doing." After a 2-hour emotional visit, Messmer turned to leave. Reaching out and touching Hampton's forearm, he offered a benediction that betrayed the freedom he felt in his heart. "James, I bid you peace!"

Wow! Isn't that a powerful story? Because Wayne Messmer received from God the gift of emotional freedom and the grace to forgive his assailants, he was able to give the tangible gift of forgiveness to one who hadn't admitted his guilt or sought reconciliation. Talk about a present that conveys the presence of Christ. That's it!

That's also a wonderful example of what I mean by the kind of gifts you might consider giving this year. They don't have to be gifts that are found at department stores or shopping malls. Maybe they are gifts that only can be purchased with the currency of love and forgiveness and offered with letters, phone calls, or hugs. Think of other gift ideas that would allow you to break the cycle of meaningless gift giving?

How will you give with the generosity of Christ this Christmas? Maybe it will mean giving fewer tangible presents and more symbolic ones. Maybe it will mean making some homemade gifts this year.

There is so much in the life of the believer that "we don't have to do" but when done always seems to bring God's special blessings to those who are the recipients as well as for those of us who do what we really didn't have to do. Let God use you to be a blessing to someone today.

A woman missionary in the South Pacific Islands was explaining to a group of children the custom and significance of giving gifts at Christmas. "Giving gifts," she said, "expresses love and reminds us of the perfect gift of love we received from God: Jesus." Later that week, a young native boy came to the missionary's side and said, "I love you and want you to have this." He pulled from a straw basket the most beautiful shell the missionary had ever seen. As she admired its beauty, she recognized it as a special shell only found on the far side of the island, a half day's walk from the village. When confronted by this, the boy smiled and said, "Long walk part of gift!"

No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor is the reward for what he gave.

Winston Churchill said, "We make a living by what we get. We make a LIFE by what we GIVE." What have you given away to a friend lately?

You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving.