

Lake Cities Community Church
Advent 2007
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“Gift Giving – God’s Style!”

Christmas grows bigger and bigger every year – Ok let’s say the Holiday Season grows bigger every year. We must come to grips that while the distinctively Christian heritage of Christmas continues to diminish the economic legacy of Christmas grows. Why? Two-thirds of America’s economy is driven by consumer spending and for many companies 40% or more of their sales come during Christmas. The average amount of money expected to be spent per person in 2007 is \$859. That is an estimated 160-180 Billion dollars expended in about six weeks.

We rightly fight to keep Christ in Christmas, but it is a battle we seem to be losing. The Washington Post wrote tongue-in-cheek: “That battle was lost long ago, probably the moment the three Magi reached into their saddlebags and pulled out those thoughtfully chosen presents.” (Washington Post, 11/29/2005). We have been addicted to gift giving ever since. Money is power and power is politics. Presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee argues that the big spending shows a healthy economy and is a good thing for his candidacy, and bad for the democrats. 2007 spending on the day after Thanksgiving day was \$16.4 Billion dollars, up 7.2% from the same percent last year, touts a press release from one of his web sites.

What are we spending so much money on? Gifts.com gives us some of the most popular items this year. For your teenager – hot items include the Wii video game system and Nike shoes that you custom design on their web site for \$150.00. Technology is just as big with younger children who are asking this year for Photokinz – a stuffed animal that holds up to 64 pictures in its belly – and virtual video games. Women still like the classics – such as a diamond necklaces and chocolate. A subscription to the Chocolate of the month club will only se you back \$27.95 per

month. Men also seem pretty predictable this year – flat screen TV's are flying out of store, and anything to do with sports. But wait – there is more! Don't forget your pets - Nearly half of all cat owners and 56 percent of dog owners plan to buy Christmas presents for their pets this year. Hot items are the “Petscell” – a cell phone and GPS tracker for dogs and Doggie Spa products – on sale at Dillards complete with luffa sponge. This Christmas Season Americans will spend \$3 Billion dollars on gifts for their pets.

What do you think about all of this? Do you empathize with Charlie Brown who cried out, “*Does anyone know what Christmas is all about?*” I hope that we do ask that question because as a church it is our job to shine our light on Jesus Christ and His coming into the world and as E.B White said, “To perceive Christmas through its wrappings becomes more difficult with every year.” E. B. White, *The Second Tree from the Corner*.

Now, I'm not saying that all gift-giving is wrong – you will have to decide for your own family how to be *in the world but not of the world*. But my purpose this morning is take our fascination with gifts to transition us to talk about another kind of gift-giving: *Gift Giving - God's Style*. Here is my theory: That our culture's obsession with gift-giving at Christmas is not just selfish materialism, but it reflects something much deeper going in people's hearts a need that will only be met by God.

What Types of Gifts are Found in the Bible?

Let's begin to develop this by briefly looking at how gifts are used in the Bible. The first type of gift is a physical gift. It was not uncommon in Bible times for people to bring gifts to their gods. Israel's non-sacrificial offerings are often referred to as gifts to the Lord. People brought the gifts to the temple in the New Testament. Now these gifts often carry with them a sense of obligation — they are part of the agreement between God and His people. It is interesting to

consider that when the Magi brought gifts to Jesus they too were bringing gifts to God – affirming for us His deity, God born among us. Not all gifts in the Bible are given to God - we have examples in Scripture of people giving gifts to one another – at times of celebration (book of Esther), in appreciation for kindness and to honor a person. **Jesus if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children how much more will God give good gifts to those who ask of him. Matt 7:11.**

But physical gifts are not the only kinds of gifts found in Scripture. The New Testament abounds with references to Spiritual Gifts. Spiritual gifts - or graces – are given by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Church. God enables us to do the work of the ministry, not in our own power – but with the very gifts of God!

But there is another gift mentioned in the Bible - THE biggest gift of all – this one is truly gift-giving God's style! The give of eternal life. The Bible says: **For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, Romans 6:23. For by grace you have been saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast, Eph 2:8-9.**

Here we see that God is the biggest spender of all – far more than \$859 per person, this gift came at the infinitely high price of God sending His son to not only be born and live among us but to die, not for his own wrongdoing but ours. He rose again from the dead so that we might have forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. The free offer of eternal life to those who believe in Jesus is gift-giving God's style.

Why did He purchase This Gift?

Now I want to ask another question – You know that Jesus died on the cross for your sins – your substitute. The question I want to ask you is why? *Why did Jesus die on that cross?* Why did He buy this gift for you at such a high price? Did he do it out of obligation - kind of like the gifts in

the OT- they are part of the deal? God is acting like a good soldier taking the heat for his troops – out of loyalty and obligation? Or, did he do it out of pity – like a rich Uncle helping a poor relation? Or maybe he was even angry – Those foolish people – now I have to go and fix it for them! Or maybe he was enamored with you and your potential to do good?

No, no and no – Why did Jesus die on the cross? Because He loved YOU. Because of love. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life, John 3:16. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, Romans 5:8

I want to remind you this morning that God loves you. He purchased this gift of eternal life for you, because He loves you. I want to pull a Murphy Johnson on you. Murphy Johnson was a Math Professor at NAU, where I worked, and he attended our church. Murphy had some rough things happen in his life. Murphy, it seemed, saw himself as having one primary purpose in our church – that was to remind us that God loved us and we ought to love one another. In adult Sunday school, if the lesson was on, say, the Samaritan woman at the well – you could be assured that at one point in the session, Murphy would put up his hand and say, “Remember, now that God is love and that is what drives everything.” I remember a business meeting where we were talking about something pertaining to the church, and Murphy put up his hand – “Don’t forget,” He said, “That God wants us to each love one another.” He saw it as his job to remind us of God’s love, because He had experienced it firsthand.

I am reminding us today that love is the greatest of Christian virtues and it was extraordinary love that motivated God the Father to send God the Son to be born, dwell among us and died for our sins.

Now this is where my theory on why people are obsessed with gift-giving comes back into play. You see there is a deeply spiritual need for love hard-wired into every person on this planet.

Giving-gifts to one another is one way of expressing this need for love. Ellen Langer, a Professor of Psychology at Harvard University wrote a few years ago in Psychology Today: “When we love, we give. Giving is a gift -- not only to others, but to ourselves--because it increases the bond between us and the person to whom we have given...

As we receive gifts we receive love from other people – as we give gifts, we give love. But our need for to be loved and to express love will never be met in another person, no matter how much money we spend. The true gift of Christmas is God’s love to us – satisfying and full. The love Jesus brought into the world. I received a Christmas card that read, “Christmas is the night love was born.” KLTU radio is using this slogan, “Of all the gifts exchanged this year – the most important is the gift of love.” And E-bay probably put it best, “Don’t just give a gift that says, “I love you.” Give a gift that says, “I know you... and love you anyway.” They probably didn’t know it, but that is the message of Christmas – **God demonstrated His love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** God said, I know you – as a sinner and rebel against me, and choose to love you anyway.

Application

We have looked at gifts in the Bible and have seen the greatest gift is the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. That give was given to you and I because God wanted to give it to us. He paid the high price because He loves us so dearly.

If you have accepted that gift – then our first point of application is to sharing the good news with the world. Our fourth purpose is represented by a gift for this very reason. We have news of the best gift even given to humanity, and we must share it with the world. Share the love of Christ through action, and deed and words. *Go Tell it on the Mountain* as the song says – over the Metroplex and everywhere! Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born and that he lived and died on the cross for your sins! We share the Good News so that His light would shine brightly in

our community. As we press into 2008, let's commit ourselves to praying for those around you who do not know Christ. Let's get equipped through the evangelism Sunday School class that picks up in two weeks, and is being taught by Jim Pence and Dave Hentschel. Pray that our church would see children and adults place their faith in Jesus Christ. Make a commitment now to participate in our future church outreach events, like Christmas caroling this evening. Any chance we get to go into the world with God's message of love is our calling, let's do that together.

A second application is this - living in loving community. We reflect Christ's love not only in our theology and outreach - but in our behavior toward one another. Dr. Stanley Toussaint said, "If you don't have love in the church, you don't have nothing! I mean that. I don't care how good the teaching and preaching is. The goal is love." - Dr. Stanley Toussaint. I want to be your Murphy Johnson - reminding us regularly that if we don't have love we have failed in everything. That is why we studied hesed love in Ruth - that is we were challenged with Peacemaking in Sunday School - that we would love one another well. If we have good teaching, and meaningful small groups, and great worship, and regularly prayer meetings and outreach events, but do not have love - we have accomplished nothing. And I see so many encouraging signs of this love among us - that encourages me more than anything else. Let's be reminded regularly that the love Christ brought into the world and expressed to us in his death is how we are to live with one another!

The final point of application is for me to ask any man, woman, boy or girl this if you do not know for sure if you will go to heaven when you die - Will you Accept the gift held out by Almighty God. He holds it out to you because He loves you. He wants to be with you for all eternity and that is a mighty long time! Will you receive the gift? Will you receive it this morning?

The intentional portrayal of salvation as a gift means that it is something that must be received. You might ask, "If God wants everyone to be saved and have eternal life, why isn't everyone going to be in heaven?" The answer is simple - because not everyone will accept the gift. I

have presents up in my closet that were selected and wrapped for various people, and brought to a family function, but that person was not there to receive the gift. I wanted them to have it – I paid for it – it is free to them, but if the gift is not received the ownership is not transferred. Don't be that person – God has a gift wrapped for you – held out to you – will you take it? Will you receive it? It is just that simple. If you have never received the gift of eternal life, why not tell God you want to do that today? Let's pray.