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## The Gifts of Christmas Selected Scriptures

### Introduction

My sermon this morning comes from an idea I picked up reading a sermon by Rev. Charles Tindley entitled "*Heaven's Christmas Tree.*" Most people who celebrate Christmas have a focus on either being with family or the presents under their Christmas tree or both. That seems to be true for Christians and non-Christians alike and appears to be the reason that about 11% of Protestant churches are not holding worship services today according to a recent LifeWay Research poll. (And 15% are not holding a worship service on New Year's Day). To me, that simply reveals there are churches that have let Christmas traditions eclipse the actual reason for celebration - the incarnation. They seem to have forgotten that Christmas is about Jesus.

Family is important, but what do you celebrate if Christmas is about family and yours is small or consists of just you? Gifts are nice, but if Christmas is about presents under the tree, what do you celebrate if your social circle is small and the only present under your tree is something for your cat? But praise the Lord, Christmas is about Jesus Christ, so you can celebrate it whether your family is huge or tiny and whether your social circle is large or small.

My title and subject for today's message is *The Gifts of Christmas.*" If you heard that phrase somewhere other than sitting in a worship service at church, you would be thinking about the gifts people give to each other at Christmas. There are toys for children - and more expensive toys for adults (the difference between men and boys is the price of their toys, and I think the same is true for females - the difference between women and girls is the price of their pearls). There are gifts of practical things such as clothing, tools and kitchen items. There are often gifts of things that are not necessarily needed but are nice to receive because they either look pretty, smell nice, or taste great. And then there are those gifts that reflect a nice thought, maybe, for which you thank the person, but the gift will be kept in storage until it can be taken to a white elephant party next year.

In my sermon last night I talked about a lot of the traditions that have developed around Christmas and the importance of remembering the reasons for those traditions lest they lose their meaning. That includes gift giving. I think we are all aware that much of what goes on in our society in giving gifts at Christmas has been fostered by marketing ploys to increase the desire to receive gifts of what you want and also give you a sense of obligation to give gifts to all sorts of people, and the marketers want you to purchase what they are selling. It has reached the point that it is not uncommon for people to equate Christmas with gifts, and that unless you get gifts, you have not had Christmas. Gifts are associated with Christmas, but giving and receiving gifts from other people is not Christmas.

Last night I talked about the historical development of the traditions of giving gifts at Christmas related to Saint Nicholas who was Bishop of Myra, Asia Minor, in the early fourth century. I am not going to repeat that this morning, but in brief, he became known for his generosity as he sought to obey Jesus' words, "*sell what you own and give the money to the poor.*" He died December 6, 343 and that day became Saint Nicholas Day with traditions developing and still practiced in Europe of giving candy and gifts to needy children on that day. He became the model for "Santa Claus" in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the day for giving gifts shifting to Christmas. So many ideas have been added to the Santa Claus legend that his origin in Saint Nicholas is largely forgotten as well as his actual practice in giving gifts. His generous charity has largely been replaced by materialistic greed.

Lest you think I am a Grinch, let me quickly add that giving gifts and sharing what you have is a fine thing to do for it is often an aspect of a joyful celebration. Scriptural examples include when David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16) and when Solomon dedicated the Temple (2 Chronicles 7). At this time of year, the Magi giving gifts in celebration of Jesus' birth comes immediately to mind. Christmas should be about celebrating the incarnation and expressing that joy to others. That is a primary reason that Christians give gifts to others at Christmas. The other primary reason is as a reflection of God's gracious gifts to man. That is what I want to talk about this morning. The important gifts of Christmas are not what people give to each other, but what God has given to men. What has God placed under His tree for man?

### **God's Tree**

I grew up with Christmas trees, so I have always liked them. I enjoy the smell and brightness they bring into a room. After Diane and I moved here, we made it a tradition to go out as a family and cut a fresh tree. It is my job to trim it, then everyone takes a hand in decorating it with the many ornaments we have collected over the years that remind us of friends and God's hand of faithfulness upon us. And though I grew up in church, it was not until I was in my early twenties that I understood the significance and relationship of a tree to Jesus Christ. That gave new meaning to having a Christmas tree and the gifts God has given to me because of Christ.

Turn first to Galatians 4:4-7, <sup>4</sup> *But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law,* <sup>5</sup> *so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.* <sup>6</sup> *Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"* <sup>7</sup> *Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.*

The birth of Jesus Christ was not happenstance. The timing, the place, His blood lineage through Mary to David and His legal lineage through Joseph to David were all requirements of prophecy and the Law for Him to be the promised redeemer. Jesus would not be born until the timing set forth in Daniel 9 would be fulfilled - the fullness of time had come. Jesus is also the fulfilment of Isaiah 9:6. He is the child promised to be born, the son promised to be given to mankind who would have the government rest on His shoulders and whose name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. Jesus is God's son sent by the Father to become a man. Jesus is the fulfilment of the ancient promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15 that would be the seed of a woman and not a man. He would be fully human through His mother, but He would be fully God through His Father who sent Him. He would be born under the Law in order to fulfill the law, something no ordinary human could do. This would qualify Jesus to be the redeemer of all mankind for all are under both the curse on Adam and personal failure to keep God's law. It is through Jesus that redeemed man can be adopted into God's family and call God, Abba! Father! We become joint heirs with Jesus of eternal life in God's presence. But how does Jesus' redeem and what does a tree have to do with it?

Turn back to Galatians 3:10-14, <sup>10</sup> *For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM."* <sup>11</sup> *Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."* <sup>12</sup> *However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM."* <sup>13</sup> *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"—* <sup>14</sup> *in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

Jesus can redeem man because though He Himself was sinless, He took on sin's curse on man's behalf when He paid sin's penalty by dying on Calvary's tree. Jesus had to die in a very particular manner. He had to die as an atoning sacrifice, which He did on Passover in fulfillment of its typology.

And He had to hang on a tree to show that He had taken on sin's curse. The cross was not a circumstantial happenstance because that was the means by which the Romans carried out executions of non-Romans. All previous efforts to murder Jesus had failed because He had to hang on a tree. That explains the significance and relationship between Jesus, a tree and redemption, but what is the relationship between that and Christmas and presents?

Turn to Ephesians 4:4-10 and pay particular attention to verses 7 & 8, <sup>4</sup> *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;* <sup>5</sup> *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,* <sup>6</sup> *one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.* <sup>7</sup> *But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.* <sup>8</sup> *Therefore it says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."* <sup>9</sup> *(Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?* <sup>10</sup> *He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)*

As Paul had pointed out earlier in Ephesians 2:8-9, it is by God's grace that anyone is saved. That salvation is granted on the basis of faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as a gift and not by any work man could do. In this passage Paul points out the unity that should be in the body and its basis. Every believer is given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift, and His gifts are based on His conquering sin and death proven when ascended on high after His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Without the cross, none of this would have happened, but because it happened, Jesus is able to give gifts to men. I will spend the rest of my sermon talking about the many gifts that came from this, but I want to make sure you see the connection between all of this.

Jesus was born for a specific purpose. John 12:27-28 records that just before Jesus' last Passover He explained to Philip and Andrew, *"Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. 'Father, glorify Your name.'" That purpose is clearly described a few verses later when Jesus says, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself," and John comments, "But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die."*

Jesus was born to die as the atonement for man's sin and by that provide the redemption price. Christmas and the Passion are inseparably linked with the former important because it enables the later, and Jesus' death and resurrection are the basis for Jesus to be able to give gifts to men. You could say that the gifts for man under God's Christmas tree were purchased with Jesus' blood. That makes each of those gifts precious not just because of what they are, but because of the price paid to secure them.

## **God's Gifts**

What are God's gifts to men? There are many for James 1:17 states that *"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow."* That is a statement that covers God's common grace to all mankind, but what about the more particular gifts that come because of Jesus Christ and what He did? Like the gifts you may find under your tree, there are those that are specifically for your benefit and those that enable you to benefit others. Salvation and all that comes with it are primarily to your personal benefit, though others will also benefit because you become a better person. Spiritual gifts are primarily for the benefit of others, though you benefit personally by gaining meaning and purpose in life.

## **The Gift of Salvation**

I will begin with the gift of Salvation and what is related to it, and the first thing to note about it is that it is a gift and not something earned. A gift is something that is given voluntarily without receiving compensation other than being thanked and perhaps the recipients endearment. It is a wage if you earned it. It is a purchase if you paid for it. You can neither earn nor purchase salvation from sin. What man has earned by his sin is death as Ezekiel 18:4 states, *"The soul who sins will die,"* and Ecclesiastes 7:20

makes clear, *“Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and who never sins.”* If man was left on his own, he would have no hope. So the first gift God gives to man through Jesus’ is hope. As Hebrews 11:1 & 6 explains, those who will have faith that God is and He is a rewarder of those who seek Him can have confident assurance God can and will provide what He promises. You do not have to remain condemned in your sins. Hope is given to the hopeless

Salvation must come as a gift from God. Again, as Ephesians 2:8-9 makes clear, <sup>8</sup> *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* Paul adds in Romans 3:23-24 that though *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*, sinful man can be *“justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”* Justification is another gift of God by which a guilty sinner is judicially absolved of the penalty because it has already been paid for by Christ.

If you got a traffic ticket but someone else paid the fine, you would be absolved of the just penalty of your transgression of the law. You would no longer be liable to the court for that fine because the law was already satisfied. That is justification, and that is what Jesus did when He died on the cross. The difference is that you might be able to pay a traffic ticket or borrow the money from someone else and eventually pay it off. You could not do that with the penalty of sin because it is death, and you cannot pay it without dying and you cannot pay it off if someone else paid the price as your substitute. Justification from sin requires the acceptance of the payment made as a gift.

Related to this, Colossians 1:14 states that through redemption in Christ, we also have the forgiveness of sin. This adds to justification the personal element of the transgression being *“remembered no more”* (Hebrews 10:17), or as Psalm 103:12 describes it, *As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.* Forgiveness is also something that must be received as a gift. You can request it, but you cannot demand it. You cannot earn it. You cannot purchase it. It is granted out of the graciousness of the one offended.

Another wonderful gift that comes with salvation is expressed in Romans 5:1-2, <sup>1</sup> *“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.”* And this peace is not just the absence of present conflict, it is the tranquility of a reconciled relationship, in this case, the Creator with His rebellious creatures so that He can now be called Father by His adopted children. This is the peace described in Psalm 85:8-10, <sup>8</sup> *“I will hear what God the LORD will say; For He will speak peace to His people, to His godly ones; But let them not turn back to folly. <sup>9</sup> Surely His salvation is near to those who fear Him, That glory may dwell in our land. <sup>10</sup> Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”* This kind of peace must also be accepted as a gift. While you can be at peace with others so far as it depends on you, you can only be at peace with God so far as it depends on Him because it is your sin that has offended Him. In addition, since God is completely self-sufficient, He gains nothing He needs by being at peace with you, but you gain everything by being at peace with Him.

Another gift that comes with salvation that benefits you is the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts traces the coming of the Holy Spirit upon believers and consistently refers to His indwelling as a gift. 1 Corinthians 12:13 makes it clear that all true Christians are baptized by the Holy Spirit, *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”* And with His indwelling comes all of His ministries and benefits to the believer including sealing which guarantees your redemption (1 Corinthians 2:12; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30), His illumination in order to be able to understand the things of God (2 Corinthians 2:14-16; 1 John 2:20), His leading (Romans 8:14); His filling (Ephesians 2:8); His work of sanctification to live righteously (1 Peter 1:2); and His empowerment to serve the Lord (Romans 15:13; Ephesians 3:16).

It is a comfort to know that according to Romans 11:29 that *“the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.”* In other words, God will not take back or revoke what He has given us in salvation and its

many ramifications. We can be confident in the present and for the future that our standing with Him will remain. God remains true to His promises for as stated in 2 Timothy 2:13, *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.”*

Salvation is the gift of God and some of the gifts related to it are hope, justification, forgiveness, peace, adoption into God’s family and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. No wonder Paul would exclaim in 2 Corinthians 9:15 regarding salvation and its many blessings, *“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”*

### **Gifts for Service**

But the gifts given by Christ to those who are saved include abilities, ministry and empowerment to serve Him and others and not just personal benefits.

Going back to Ephesians 4, after Paul speaks of Jesus ascending on high, leading a host of captives and giving gifts to men, he continues on in verses 11-16 to say, <sup>11</sup> *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,* <sup>12</sup> *for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;* <sup>13</sup> *until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.* <sup>14</sup> *As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;* <sup>15</sup> *but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,* <sup>16</sup> *from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*

Paul speaks about this theme in Romans 12 and expands on it in detail in 1 Corinthians 12, but in brief, God gifts people with spiritual gifts, ministries and empowerment for ministry as He desires for the good of the whole body that the whole church should mature. In this passage Paul stresses the fact that God has equipped the church with people in particular offices who will be able to train others for the work of ministry. In all these passages there is a stress that every gift, ministry and empowerment is needed for the church to reach its full potential. Believers who remain uninvolved leave the rest of the body handicapped and vulnerable. The church will survive and carry out some ministry, but it is left hindered in its ability to do what it could and should be doing. It is also left more vulnerable to false teachers who seek to harm the body. When everyone in the body is functioning properly, the whole body can stand firm and grow stronger.

It is important that you see your ability to minister to others as a gift. Paul describes his own gospel ministry in those terms in Ephesians 3:7 saying, *“I was made a minister, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.”* He reminded Timothy in both 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6 of the origin of his spiritual gift and to not neglect it but to kindle it afresh. In 1 Peter 4:10 the apostle makes a general statement of similar nature to all believers, *“As each one has received a gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”*

Understanding that your spiritual abilities, ministries and empowerment are all gifts from God removes pride and promotes unity. It eliminates pride by removing the basis for thinking that you are somehow superior to others for even if what you do is more prominent and affects more people, it is God, not you that is the cause of it. At best, you can only be a faithful slave who has done what the Lord has asked (Luke 17:10). It promotes unity because it stresses that everyone and every gift is needed for the whole body to function properly.

A lesson to heed from Paul’s correction of the Corinthian church is that spiritual gifts must be accompanied by spiritual maturity if they are to be effective. Paul pointed out to them in 1 Corinthians 1:7 that they were *not lacking in any gift*, but he rebukes them in 1 Corinthians 13 that they were no

better than a clanging cymbal, were nothing and had no profit from their ministries because they lacked love. That lack caused them to be impatient, be unkind, be jealous, be arrogant, brag, act shamefully, be selfish, easily provoked, hold grudges, and tolerate immorality. God gifts the believer to serve Him, but the Christian must use those gifts in conjunction with godly behavior in order to be effective in glorifying God.

### **Conclusion**

Gifts are part of Christmas, but the important gifts are not those under your Christmas tree, but those that come from God because of what Jesus Christ accomplished on a tree at calvary. He was born to die as the sacrifice for sin to redeem man and grant salvation as a gift of His grace to those that will place their faith in Him and what He did. With the gift of salvation come many other gifts including hope, justification, forgiveness, peace, adoption into God's family, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that will bless you as an individual, and spiritual abilities, ministries and empowerment that will enable you to be a blessing to others.

May you now look at Christmas trees a little differently so that they are a reminder of the relationship between Christmas, Jesus, a tree and God's gifts to you that come with salvation from sin.

Sermon Notes - December 25, 2016  
THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS - Selected Scriptures

**Introduction**

The gifts of Christmas

Origin of giving gifts at Christmas

**God's Tree**

Galatians 4:4-7

Galatians 3:10-14

Ephesians 4:4-10

John 12:27-28

**God's Gifts**

James 1:17

**The Gift of Salvation**

Hope: Ezekiel 18:4; Eccl. 7:20; Hebrews 11:1,6

Salvation - Ephesians 2:8-9;

Justification - Romans 3:23-24

Forgiveness - Colossians 1:4

Peace - Romans 5:1-2, Psalm 85:8-10

The Holy Spirit - Acts, 1 Corinthians 12:13

Indwelling,  
sealing,  
illumination,  
leading,  
filling,  
sanctification,  
empowerment

**Gifts for Service**

Ephesians 4:11-16

Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12

Ministry ability is a gift - Ephesians 3:7; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6;

1 Peter 4:10

Ministry gifts must be accompanied by ministry maturity - love  
1 Corinthians

**Conclusions**