

## **Christmas Is Not Your Birthday**

Beginning this week, we're heading now with real purpose for Christmas. I love Christmas! It's my favorite time of year. I love everything about it: the decorations, the music, the food, the anticipation of seeing family and friends and, of course, the presents! Financially, Christmas is salvation for most retailers. Do you know why they call it Black Friday? Because, for most retailers, that's the first day of the year their budget moves into the black! Do they realize whom they have to thank for that? Maybe it should be called "Thank you, Jesus" Friday.

I'm not sure how the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas got started. It probably has something to do with the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that Jesus received, but how did that turn into giving gifts to each other? Wouldn't that be like the Wise Men and the shepherds coming to Jesus and then giving the gifts to one another? While it's great that the "Christmas Spirit" means that we think of others, would you consider it a great Christmas if you gave gifts to all your family members but didn't get any yourself? Be honest!!

A few years ago, Google released a database of over 5 million books published between the years 1500 and 2008. You can now do a word search to discover how often certain words have been used in books over the centuries. A New York Times columnist did that and found something very interesting. In the last 50 years, "individualistic words and phrases increasingly overshadowed communal words and phrases." For instance, before 1960 you frequently found words like: "community," "share," "band together" and "common good." Since 1960 you more frequently find words like: "self," "personalized," "I come first," "I can do it myself." An interesting correlation is the decline of words of moral virtue in the past 50 years. Certain words were especially hard hit like: "modesty," "humbleness," "discipline," "patience," "faith" and even "evil." The columnist, **David Brooks**, draws this conclusion:

*"Over the past half-century, society has become more individualistic. As it has become more individualistic, it has also become less morally aware, because social and moral fabrics are inextricably linked." <sup>i</sup>*

If we really acted this year as if it were Jesus' birthday that we were celebrating, how might our Christmas be changed? To answer that, I think we have to answer two other questions. The first is...

### **I. Who's the Guest of Honor?**

As believers, we all know who the party is for; it's for Jesus. But are we acting that way? Now look, I'm not suggesting that Jesus is unhappy that we give gifts to one another. He's thrilled when we're givers; but in our gift giving are we careful to always acknowledge that the reason we're doing it is to celebrate His life? If someone walked into your house decorated for Christmas, would they know you're celebrating Jesus' birthday or would there be more evidence that you're celebrating cartoon characters who have specials on TV this time of year? If you decorated your

house to celebrate the birthday of someone in your family and a neighbor walked in, my guess is they at least would say, “Hey, whose birthday is it?” Right? When we decorate our houses for Christmas, shouldn’t it be obvious whose birthday we’re celebrating?

I’m sure many of you have done for your children what Liz and I did for ours as they grew up. At different stages of their lives, we decorated our house at their birthday according to what their life was about at that time. So, when they were in sports, we made a cake in the shape of a ball and when they were studying a certain major in college, we decorated according to that theme. Hebrews 1 gives us several themes we could use to decorate our houses to celebrate Jesus’ birthday. Look at it:

**In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Heb. 1:1-3)**

Now, for those of you who are creative (and I know a lot of you are!) how much fun could you have picking a birthday decorating theme from just these titles for Jesus?

- Last Days Prophet
- Heir of All Things
- Maker of the Universe
- The Radiance of God’s Glory
- Sustainer of All Things by His Powerful Word
- Purifier of My Sin
- The One Whose Throne is in Heaven

What if you made tree ornaments with these titles of Jesus? Or instead of just having little napkins that say, “Merry Christmas,” why not have a giant poster that says, “Happy Birthday to the Maker of the Universe!!!” People will walk in your house and go, “Whoa! What religion are you guys?” Who’s gonna be the real guest of honor at your Christmas celebration this year? Secondly, we need to ask...

## **II. What Does Jesus Want for His Birthday?**

If we’re invited to someone’s birthday party, isn’t that the first question we ask? Have you EVER asked that question as you moved toward Christmas? Now, before we answer that question, we need to consider something else. If you’re invited to someone’s birthday party, doesn’t what you bring as a gift depend on how well you know that person? I mean, it makes a difference if this is your best friend in the world or if this is your boss, right? If it’s your boss, it’s gotta be a safe gift, not something risky or humorous, because it might be hilarious to you, but if the boss isn’t laughing, ain’t nobody laughing!

But if it’s your best friend, you can risk doing something hilarious or maybe you do something to try to communicate just how important their friendship is to you. That’s what Paul is doing with his dear friends in Corinth. Listen to what he says in his “greeting card” to them from the translation, *The Message*:

*Every time I think of you – and I think of you often! –I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus. There’s no end to what has happened in you – it’s beyond speech, beyond knowledge. The evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives. (I Cor. 1:4-6 The Message)*

So, what does Jesus want from us for His birthday? Well, He gave us a pretty big hint in John 14:12 when He said:

**I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.**

We’re tempted to think that Jesus is the epitome of the “Man Who Has Everything.” While technically that is true, there are still some gifts He would truly appreciate from us. By the way, have you ever received a gift like that from someone you dearly love, like Jesus loves you? A hand-made present perhaps that on the open market is a piece of junk, but to you, because you know their heart, it’s more valuable than gold. If your house were burning down, you’d leave the china and the TV and take “that gift” because it represents their heart-love for you. So, what could you give to Jesus this year for His birthday that would be a gift like that?

Jesus says that we are capable of “doing what He was doing” if we have faith in Him. But how can that be? We look at His miraculous actions and we think, “He healed people, He caused two fish and five loaves to feed thousands, He raised people from the dead!! I can’t do that!!” But if we think that way, we’re missing the point. We’re not looking deep enough. See, what was Jesus really doing? Think of it this way, “Why was Jesus performing all those miracles? Did Jesus feed people JUST to meet their physical hunger? Did Jesus raise people from the dead JUST so that they could live a few more years or decades only to eventually die again? Did Jesus calm the storm at sea JUST to dispel the fear of His disciples?” No!! This is where liberal theologians massively miss the point when they focus exclusively on feeding, healing or economic-improvement ministries. Is it wrong to feed, heal or lift people out of poverty? NO, of course not. Jesus told us to do that. But if that’s all you do, you actually are NOT “doing what Jesus was doing.”

Some of you are now thinking, “What are you talking about, pastor?” I’ll tell you – when Jesus did His miracles, it wasn’t ONLY to meet a person’s physical need. The Bible makes this point very, very strongly. Yes, Jesus cared deeply for hurting people and wanted to help them. Yes, Jesus’ heart ached for people, as Dr. Murray pointed out last week, but His ache wasn’t ONLY because of their physical, emotional or economic need! The apostle John tells us clearly the primary reason why Jesus did miracles in John 20:30, 31. He writes:

**Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written (why?) that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

Jesus’ heart ached because the people were spiritually dead and He wanted to give them life!!! Why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the grave? To give people hope that they could have their dead relatives raised from the grave to live another ten years? No! Jesus raised Lazarus to rivet the people’s attention on His message of eternal life through faith in Him. And this strategy worked incredibly well. Right

before the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, listen to the impact that the resurrection of Lazarus had on the people:

**Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. (John 12:9-11)**

BINGO!! Jesus did miracles primarily so that *"...you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in His name."*

So, what does Jesus want for His birthday? He wants you to do what He has been doing. You ask, "I'm supposed to do miracles?" Actually, no. We'll talk about miracles next week. Let's boil it down to this: He knows you can't do miracles. He wants you to give as He gave. Jesus was a very generous person (still is!) and He wants you to learn to give like He gives. How does Jesus give? Three ways. **First, Jesus gives with no expectation of getting something of equal value in return.** This is a big temptation for us, isn't it? At Christmas, we're tempted to measure the worth of someone's gift to us by the worth of what we gave to them. My Dad was a very generous man and always gave great Christmas presents, but it was hard for my brother and me to figure out what to give him. Ever been there? One Christmas we decided to give him a model of a tall sailing ship. You know what I mean - like the Charles W. Morgan? I don't know why we chose that. We lived in Minnesota! My dad had no interest in sailing!! After we opened our presents that year, we were ashamed of our gift to him. But you know what he did? He opened it and made this huge fuss over how much he loved it. Then he moved stuff off the mantle piece over the fireplace and put our ship there, where it sat until the day he died. My dad knew how to give like Jesus with no expectation of receiving something of equal value.

**Secondly, Jesus gives gifts to relieve pain and promote joy.** We tend to only give gifts that promote joy and that's not bad but, it's not exactly what Jesus does. There are 36 miracles of Jesus recorded in the Bible and all but one is done to address some hurt, pain or significant need in a person's life. The one that isn't exactly that is the withering of the fig tree, which we might say was done to meet an instructional need in the disciples.

So, to give like Jesus, what do we need to do? We have to learn where a person hurts, don't we? How can we learn that? The prayer topics of the prayer cards that you all fill out are mostly about hurts, pains or significant needs in someone's life. Some of you also ask us to join you in the joy of praising God for something He has done, but 80 to 90 percent of the cards mention a hurt, pain or significant need. If you want to know where a person hurts or where they have need, why don't you ask them how you could pray for them? And if they trust you enough to tell you, you'll be able to give to them as Jesus gives to them - at the very least, you can give them the gift of knowing that someone actually cares what is happening in their life.

**A third way that Jesus gives is that He gives gifts that point to a person's greatest need: his/her spiritual need.** We've already noted that all of His miracles did this. For example, when Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water in the

storm, He first of all addressed their fear – they thought they were going to drown. But then He calmed the storm, demonstrating His power, and the disciples asked:

**...What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!**(Mt.8:27)

When Jesus healed someone, He often said to them, “...*your faith has healed you.*” (Matt. 9:22, Mk. 5:34, 10:52, Lk. 8:48, 17:19, 18:42) Why did He say that? So that they “*might believe that He was the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing they might have life in his name.*” The gifts Jesus gave ALWAYS pointed to a person’s greater need: their spiritual need. He did not heal or feed or rescue for the sake of healing, feeding or rescuing on the physical level. He did miracles on the physical level to open a discussion with people about their spiritual need – “*so they might believe and by believing have life in his name.*” Jesus gave gifts:

- with no expectation of receiving a gift of equal worth in return.
- to relieve pain and promote joy.
- that point to a person’s greatest need: his/her spiritual need.

If you give gifts like that this Christmas, you’ll be giving as Jesus gives. Can you do that? Yes, you can. How do I know? Because as a follower of Jesus, you are “in Christ” and the passage from I Corinthians says that, if you are in Christ, three things are true...

**...you have been ENRICHED in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge – because our testimony about Christ was CONFIRMED in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will KEEP YOU STRONG to the end... God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.** (I Cor. 1:5-9)

Finally, in the second half of John 14:12, Jesus says:

**[You] will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.**

How can we do “greater things” than what Jesus did? The Greek word translated “greater” literally means, “any extension in space in all directions.” It’s not greater in quality but greater in quantity. At Pentecost, there were more converts to Christ from Peter’s sermon than from all of Christ’s sermons in His three year ministry. How could this happen? Because Jesus went to the Father, the Holy Spirit was released into ALL the disciples so there could be an “extension of Christ’s work in all directions.”

In the little church I grew up in in Minnesota was a man I knew as Dr. Walt. The world knows him as the “Father of Open Heart Surgery,” Dr. Clarence “Walt” Lillehei. At the age of 35, he performed the first successful surgery to repair a damaged heart. If all he did was repair hearts himself, in his lifetime he probably could’ve saved hundreds of lives. But Dr. Walt was also an educator who trained over 1,000 other heart surgeons from over 40 countries, including men like Dr. Christiaan Barnard who accomplished the first heart transplant in 1967. Because of his dedication to training others, hundreds of thousands of damaged hearts have been repaired through the work of Dr. Walt. <sup>ii</sup>

Jesus did incredible miracles in His three years on earth, but if you put your faith in Him, He will do even greater things through His Spirit working in you. What does Jesus want for His Birthday? He wants to use you to repair damaged hearts.

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<sup>i</sup> David Brooks, "What Our Words Tell Us," *The New York Times* (5-20-13)

<sup>ii</sup> C. Walton Lillehei, Wikipedia