

“The Ultimate Christmas Gift”
James 1:17 & Matthew 7:7–11
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In this study, I want us to think about gifts. I have two questions for those I’m speaking in front of and one is how many of you open your Christmas presents on Christmas Eve? I see there are not very many. You’re to be commended because delayed gratification is a great thing in life. How many of you open them on Christmas morning? I see quite a few and I assume the rest of you just kind of get around to it because you’re not morning people which works until you have kids and then later on grandkids. We now have four grandchildren who will be joining us right at the end of this year so we’ll have a little bit of a late Christmas.

I want to talk about the ultimate Christmas gift. There’s a lot of cynicism in terms of gift giving due to it becoming secularized, it’s been hijacked by our culture. We don’t even get Thanksgiving because as soon as Halloween has come and gone, then boom, Christmas decorations are everywhere in stores. If you travel to the Philippines, you’d be late because they put up their trees, even in their homes, a lot of them on September 1st and they explain that it’s because it’s when the “burr/ber” months start – September, October, November, December. I’ve been there. I’ve never experienced a “burr” month myself. They say “It gets down in the 70s sometimes, really it does.” ‘Okay,’ but the over commercialization of Christmas can steal our joy. We know that there are credit card bills just waiting to arrive in the mail in January and as some of you look at all the packages under your tree, you see dollar signs and you see decisions where you wish you could have some of those back. Don’t let that poison your view of the gift giving process.

We moved to Atlanta in 1992 so the Christmas of 92 was our first Christmas there, after being in a much smaller community in Illinois. I remember one day my wife had gotten stuck in the traffic. I said, ‘Where were you?’ She said, “It was that one intersection I hate.” I said, “Oh, Pleasant Hill and Satellite.” She said “It was more like ‘sat at a light, an unpleasant hell.’” To this day, that is what that intersection is called in our household.

It’s easy to want to so uncouple the Christmas message from what our culture has done to it that we’re tempted to just go “gifts, that’s all wrong.” I want to challenge that thinking today because I believe the giving of gifts is at the very heart of the message of Christmas. Matthew 7:11 is actually a passage that is written about prayer, and Jesus is talking to His Disciples, His closest friends and He says to them [11] *If you then, who are evil* (which includes all of us because we’re all sinners for we’ve all fallen short of His glory), *know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

We do know how to give good gifts to our children. Think about what we will do to give gifts to our children, the financial sacrifices that we’ll make in other areas. The dreaded words on the package that says ‘some assembly required.’ Our kids are in their 30s now, but years ago, Emily just wanted a Barbie Starlight bed and then there were those foreboding words – some assembly required. The patience of Job, and a master’s degree from Georgia Tech would have been a good idea. This is a true story, it’s not like preacher embellishment. I stayed up so late and the worst part of it was when you open the curtains on the Barbie Starlight bed, but there was a light that came on or was supposed to come on. Eventually I solved that problem. I think it was about 4am before I finally went to bed. I stashed the Barbie Starlight bed in a closet where my

old tuba is stored. It doesn't get much action these days. It's kind of a forgotten closet. I stayed up so late that we forgot all about it the next day and Emily actually discovered that gift about May of the following year. Jesus says 'you know how to give good gifts to your children and you're evil, imperfect and your motives aren't always right on target' but then says "Then how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good gifts to those who ask him!" Gift giving is a spiritual activity, despite our cultures attempts to turn it into a means for profit.

James 1:17 says [17] *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* I love that verse. We think of that in terms of when God answers one of our prayers that that's a gift from God, but if you are in a relationship and find fulfillment in that relationship, that ultimately is a gift from God. If you receive a present and you're like, 'thank you so much. I don't even know how you knew to get me that.' Acknowledge every good gift and perfect gift comes from above. If you have surgery and a gifted neurosurgeon is able to correct something that's gone wrong somewhere in your brain with just the tenderness and the delicate care of all of that, yes, we're thankful for the medical breakthroughs. I'm sure glad I live in this country and I'm very glad to live in this century. I praise God for those of you who serve Him in the medical arts but ultimately, even that quality of medical care is one of those gifts that comes down from Father God. It's so beautiful.

I want us to think for a minute, what makes a good gift? Here are three things I believe that can make for a good gift. Number one, something they want. That's obvious, isn't it? I mean, my wife and my daughter both have this special gift of shopping all year long and even before they shop, they listen all year long and they write things down. Now, they're not so good at putting it in a place where they'll remember where they put it, but they're just always, always listening. I sometimes don't even remember something. I said one time, if I ever won the lottery, what would I do? And it's like, we don't even play the lottery. But I like my life the way it is. I love leading Walk through the Bible. I love our family. We have a wonderful home, a great dog and I just wouldn't change much. Then finally I said, 'no, I would change.' I would empty my sock drawer, fill it up with all brand new socks, start over. They would all have mates and I would give myself the extravagant pleasure of shaving each day with a brand new disposable razor. That's how my life would change if I won the lottery.

I think about a time when I received something I really wanted. I believe I was eight years old and I had begged and begged my parents for a puppy. They just didn't think that I was responsible enough or old enough for a puppy. My brother was ten years older and my sister seven years older. She was in high school. He was getting ready to head to college and I just begged and begged. Christmas morning my brother wakes me up, "Philip, Philip, get up, get up, get up. Go look under the tree. You're not going to believe it." I just jumped out of bed. I flew into the living room. The living room, by the way, in our home was the holy of holies. You didn't just walk in there any time you wanted. Mom had to invite you. There was this two inch tall lime green shag carpet that actually came with a rake. It was tacky beyond belief. They could tell if you'd been in there or not, because it was like a sand trap. You had to rake your way out or you would get caught.

There underneath the tree was a puppy. It was made of cloth, was blue and it didn't even look like a dog. It was perfectly square like that and in our family, you didn't show disappointment that would be ingratitude. So I said "thank you, Mom and dad. That's exactly the breed I wanted." I'm sure they were all laughing. About 15 minutes after that, my brother says, 'Hey, Dad needs your help out in the garage now.' I went out in the garage and it wasn't a fancy

box like most presents are wrapped in but it was an old beat up box. There was straw inside and down in the bottom of that box was a live puppy. We named her Heidi Sue. Now she has pedigree, so she was Hayden Sousaphone, because I played the tuba which seemed appropriate. I couldn't believe it. This dog and I were inseparable. Something somebody wants is a great, great gift.

The second kind of gift that can be a good gift is something someone needs that's more practical. Each year at Thanksgiving and lots of times at Christmas and maybe occasionally throughout the year, Ellen, my wife will make this homemade applesauce that is so good. It barely has any added sugar, but it's just spiced just right. Our daughter in law, Erica, also loves that but the process of peeling enough apples takes so long. When I help peel the apples, I think, 'surely this is enough apples for applesauce' and Ellen will look and say "You're not even halfway there." Erica, a few years ago, blessed not only Ellen, but really me with this gift – an apple peeler. You put an apple on the end, crank it so that it gradually moves, and it just peels the apple clean as anything. This is so great. Does it rank up there with a puppy? Maybe not but to give somebody something they need like that, that's wonderful. So, what's the first gift? It is something they want. What's the second gift? It is something they need.

The third gift is something they could never get for themselves. That's harder. Many years ago in 1980, Ellen and I had been dating a couple of years. We were driving down to Charlotte and the whole way down she was saying "At some point, you need to talk to my folks if you're really serious about moving ahead with this and you're missing a good opportunity if you don't do this. It's a long way from Wheaton, Illinois." I said, "I have this under control." We went for a walk. We got rained out on the walk and we ended up on this love seat in their house which was where her grandparents got engaged and I pulled out this poem called Man's Timeless Search. *I shall not read it all to you. It does begin like this;*

*Back in the beginning, when God fashioned the earth,
He created all life and assigned it high worth.*

*And then on the sixth day came His best effort yet
Divine image to man did Creator beget.*

In utopian garden God placed him to dwell

Despite the perfection, things were still not quite well,

For Adam was lonely. He was yet incomplete.

Recognizing his need, God gave Eve as help me.

And then we kind of go on from there and I eventually I get a little more current. I say,

My life is no different than the story just told,

For years I've been searching just like Adam of old, etc. etc.

Then I kind of retrace our relationship and I'm pretty sure the light bulbs were going on for Ellen at this point and then I went in for the big close. Anybody in sales knows you have to get to the ask.

My purpose, I'm sure, is no longer a mystery.

The aim of this poem is far more than history.

Our future's the focus, a commitment for life.

Will you please take this ring and in time be my wife?

This was a double gift. It came bonus with a little black box with a diamond ring in it and four days ago was our 43rd anniversary. So yay! Now, could she have written herself a poem? I suppose possibly saying something like; 'To you, who is me by the name of Ellen. I'm so

thankful you are not a felon.' I don't know what she would have said. Could she have bought herself a ring? Sure but it wouldn't have meant the same thing.

Let's think about those three gifts. If your gift meets one of those three criteria, it's a good gift. If you can find a way to do two things, maybe something they want and something they need you've given a great gift. This probably happens very seldom in our lives but to hit all three, the Triple Crown, that's a perfect gift. That's why James 1:17 where we began is so powerful. *[17] Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

Let's think about those one at a time. God's gift of His only Son, Jesus provides something we want. What do we want more than anything else? We want life. We cling to it. God has hardwired that into us. It's the fight that we have to survive. He's just made us that way. We love length of life. Last night, about 3:50am, Ellen's phone rang and the nurse said, "Hi, this is Jackie. Ellen, I need to tell you that 10 minutes ago we pronounced your father dead. Another nurse came up from the other floor. We made the decision mutually." Now he's been in assisted living. He's 93, was going to be 94 in February. The fighter never gave up on anything. He's been in hospice care the last couple of weeks. So in a way, this wasn't a shock but are we ever really prepared for that final phone call? Thankfully, virtually everybody in the family has had a really good time with him over the last month, which is a gift because we're scattered all over the place, but still, that call came.

Aren't you glad when we talk about this, that we're not just talking about earthly life because there is a life that makes our years on earth, whether those are 70 or 20 or 90, seem like an instant. Probably the first verse many of you ever learned was John 3:16-17 which says *[16] For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.* Talk about a perfect gift, the gift of eternal life.

As we've discovered more and more, life is not just about quantity, about length, it's also about quality of life and as Ellen's dad's quality of life declined more and more, he was saying, 'Please pray I can go home. I just want to go home.' Ellen's mom died a number of years ago after 12 years battling with Alzheimer's. I hate that disease. It's a long, drawn out, sad goodbye. Her dad was like, 'I just want to go home. I want to see Jesus. I want to see my wife.' God answered that prayer at 4:40am, eastern time, Charlotte time, but 3:40am central time, here.

It's not just the length of life, though, it is the quality of life. Jesus in John 10:10b says *[10b] I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly.* It's not just the length of life, it's the quality of life and eternal life does not begin when we die. It begins when we meet Jesus as Savior. All of a sudden, we have purpose we've never had before. All of a sudden, we have a family like this Briarwood family. It's a beautiful thing. We have more than anything else, a relationship where we have free access to the Lord in prayer because of the death of His Son, Jesus Christ. So yes, it's quantity of life, even eternal, never ending, but it's quality too.

After hearing of Ellen's dad's passing we never did go back to sleep. There were many phone calls to be made and she says "you have to preach today at Briarwood. I'm so sorry that this happens now because you need to be focused..." I said 'I'm fine. This is why we share this message as moments like we're living through right now.' She said "I know, I know, I know but I just hate it that death would interrupt Christmas." I don't normally say profound things like some Christian authors. I'm just not that fancy but something came out of my mouth and I went, 'That's good. I got to write that down later but honey, you've actually got that backwards. Death

didn't interrupt our Christmas. It is, in fact, Christmas that interrupts death.” That's true. In that trilogy of Christmas carols that we just sang, I was watching Ellen's face all through that. Never have the words of those songs been as meaningful as they were to us today. Those are powerful truths. It's a tragedy we only sing those songs a couple Sundays a year because their message is for any time.

God's gift of His only Son, Jesus also provides something we need. Paul in Romans 3:23 says [23] *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* That's just true for to sin literally means to miss the mark, to not hit the bull's eye. Is there anyone here who would not freely acknowledge that you've messed up? We've all messed up. Comparisons to each other is not the issue but compared to God Himself, we all fall short. Romans 6:23a says [23a] *For the wages of sin is death...* The paycheck that our sin earns us at the end of a lifetime is death. Yes, physical death, because that's ultimately a result of living in a fallen world. Adam and Eve messed up and we followed in their footsteps. But it's not just physical death. It's spiritual death. It's separation from God forever. That's what you and I each deserve. I'm so glad Romans 6:23 doesn't just stop there, but good news isn't good news unless you embrace the bad news first. Romans 6:23b says, [23b] *But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.* Praise His Name.

Could it get any better than that? Oh yeah, because He's three for three. God's gift of His only begotten Son Jesus also provides something we could never get for ourselves. We can never be good enough. It's not like God puts our works on a scale and we make the cut and we're heaven bound. That's not how it works. Ephesians 2:8-9 says [8] *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* G.R.A.C.E – God's Riches At Christ's Expense. We have been saved through faith, through belief, through trust and this is not of our own doing. We don't gin up enough faith and that's the point. It doesn't depend on us. If it depended on us, heaven would be a ghost town.

We live in a pluralistic society. We live in a world where even a simple message like this to some is branded as arrogance. Do you really mean that your way is right and everybody else is way is wrong? That's not the issue. There's nothing about it being my way or your way. It's what this Book says. If you dig into the history of the Bible, the supernatural nature of it, the way it's been preserved through the centuries, the way even though there's many authors over centuries and yet the message hangs together beautifully. It really is God breathed truth this book called the Bible.

In Acts 4:11-12 says [11] *This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. [12] And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.* Something we want, something we desperately need and something none of us could ever get for ourselves no matter how good, how moral we are, how much we give to the church, how much we serve. We could never get it on our own. That's why He provided the gift of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice in our place. As you think about this and if all I did was just tell you that and not give you an opportunity to respond, I believe that would be ministerial malpractice. I believe we would hear heavy footsteps in heaven as Harry Reeder paced back and forth and said ‘you got clear to the end and then you fumbled the ball at the one yard line Phil.’ I don't want my father in law and Harry Reeder are talking about me this afternoon.

You know something about a gift, when does it become yours? When the person buys it for you? No, or maybe when the person wraps it for you? When they set it under the tree? Maybe. When they take it and they place it in your hands? Then you step back and say, ‘I don't

want to mess up the bow. That's much too pretty a package for me.' You see, that's the way it is with Jesus. It's not enough to say, "I believe there was a man named Jesus. I'll even go so far as to believe He died on the cross. I struggle that He didn't stay dead and on the third day, He was raised from the dead, but I can kind of, for the sake of argument, let's say that happened." That's not belief. That's not trust. That's an intellectual activity. The word faith and trust means to place my dependance on this.

There was a missionary years ago, I was doing translation work with and he could not find a word for faith or trust in the tribes language. They view that as a weakness. They were warriors. Finally, one day, as he is doing this work for he's been with this tribe for years, a messenger comes from a different village, and I don't even remember what the news was, but it was big news. He announced his news and then he turns and he uttered a phrase the missionary never heard before and then he just collapsed on this cot that was there. Several days later, the missionary asked some of his translator helpers, 'What did that person say?' And they repeated the phrase and he said "I've never heard this. What does it mean?" And they finally managed to cross the language barrier. They said, 'It means I'm putting my full weight on you. If you don't catch me, I'm falling through.' In that edition of the Scripture that's the word they chose for faith and trust. Isn't that beautiful?

Some of you have been at Briarwood since, like it was a Bible study. Some of you this is your first time here you have another home church. Can we just be real honest? We get talked into stuff by grandma at the holidays. In my family, there are many CEO Christians in it and that stands for 'Christmas and Easter Only.' They're Christians, CEOs and I get that. I believe God went to great lengths to bring us together so we can have this conversation. There's no doubt in my mind about that. So the offer in this study is, will you receive Jesus as your Savior, as your sin Sacrifice?

Probably the majority of reading this would say, 'I did that a long time ago.' Then guess what? Will you just let that flood your heart with gratitude like you haven't felt in a long time? Will you shed an extra tear or two this Christmas just out of appreciation that He really does, not just God so loved the world, but God loved you so much that He gave His only begotten Son. Because if you were the only person on Earth, Jesus still would have come and died. That's how much He cares about you. So thank Him for that. But if for you and again, doesn't mean this is your first time, but maybe it just made sense, then reach out your hands and open your heart and receive the gift of Jesus' death in your place. It had to be a perfect sacrifice. I couldn't die for your sins because I'm just as messed up as anybody in this room.

Jesus came and yes, we celebrate His birth at Christmas, but He lived a perfect life. He died a horrendous death on Calvary's cross but He didn't stay dead and that was the Father's way of saying the debt has been paid. The door to heaven is open. I ask right now if you would just close your eyes and bow your head for a minute. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Maybe you've never responded to the gift of Jesus Christ being offered to you. I think for this study that's why God brought us together. Just in the quietness of your own heart you can just speak truth to Him. He can handle it. In fact, He's been waiting to hear these words from you. The exact phrasing is not important, but say something like this in your heart; 'Dear God, I realize that I have sinned against You. And, Lord, no matter how hard I try, I can't be perfect. (Tell Him that for He already knows. He wants to know that you know it.) I can't fix my own problem. I can't pay my own debt. Thank You, Jesus, for dying in my place, for taking the death

penalty for things I had done wrong. I receive You by faith. I put my trust in You. God, show me what it means to be your child. Let me now live a life not trying to win Your pleasure, but a life expressing my gratitude because You gave me a gift I wanted, needed and I could have never gotten it for myself before.' If you prayed a prayer or something like that please call us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200, because we'd love to pray with you and help you on your journey with Christ. Dear Father I think there's a party going on in heaven right now. There's rejoicing that the family just got bigger, that we have some new brothers and sisters. Lord, even death cannot separate us from You so whether we just made that response of faith now or it happened years ago, Lord, overwhelm us again with Your goodness, Your grace, Your love for us. You are the giver of every good and perfect gift. And, Lord, when the time comes, when we leave this earth, we look forward to a reunion that's never going to end. Lord, thank You for the gift of Jesus Christ for it is in His Name that we pray, Amen.