

The Perfect Gift

Matthew 2:1-12

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A big part of most of our Christmas celebrations revolves around gift-giving. Most of us like receiving gifts, but you probably have also learned the joy of giving good gifts as well. There is something special about finding a gift that communicates to a person that they are special, that they are seen, and they are loved.

I know some people who begin their Christmas shopping almost as soon as Christmas ends. Many others begin their shopping in September or October, and there's probably a few who haven't begun shopping yet, as they're convinced that they can find the perfect gift at Wal-mart or Dollar General on Christmas Eve. I'm not sure those people are correct, but I admire their optimism!

In most families, there is someone who is incredibly difficult to get gifts for. In my family, I'm that person. I think there's a couple of reasons I'm difficult to buy for. First, if there's something I want, I usually end up buying it at some point, so there's usually not a lot that I want that isn't really expensive. Second, I tend to be pretty particular about the things I want. I know people are always a bit scared to "go rogue" and get something on their own, because they're afraid it might not be something I'd like. Thankfully, Amazon has made life a bit easier with wish lists. When Ashlee and I were dating, she was excited to learn there was a magical list that would allow her to pick out something she was sure I would enjoy.

I'm not sure who the difficult person to buy for is in your family, but I'm confident that none of those people take the cake for the most difficult person to get a gift for—that title goes to Jesus. After all, how can you possibly get a gift for the Creator of the universe? But tonight, I want to look at exactly that, and to see what the perfect gift for Jesus really is. It is my hope that in so doing, we can go into our Christmas celebrations with exactly the right mindset.

Wise Men

You are probably familiar with the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem while she was very pregnant. While they were there, she gave birth, but they were unable to find any lodging, so they stayed in a stable with the baby that night. Angels announced the birth to shepherds nearby, who came and worshiped the baby, who wasn't lying in a crib, but in a feeding trough for animals.

Most of our nativity scenes depict Mary, Joseph, and Jesus being visited by shepherds and wise men all at the same time, but the wise men probably didn't arrive that same night but later. When the wise men arrived isn't really relevant to the story, but it's worth mentioning.

Additionally, while most people assume there were three wise men, the Bible doesn't tell us that. It just says that they brought three gifts. The idea of three wise men comes from the idea that each one brought a unique gift. It makes sense, though we can't be sure that was the case. Their three gifts are also very famous (and the answer to many good trivia questions). I want to look at these gifts briefly and examine why they were appropriate for them to offer, but probably not what Jesus would desire from us.

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!

¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. (Matthew 2:9-12, NLT)

These wise men came and offered Jesus three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These seem like strange gifts to give to a baby, and truthfully, most of us don't even know what these things are. But I want to talk briefly about why each of them was an appropriate, and even prophetic gift for Jesus.

Gold probably makes the most sense to us. Gold is a fitting gift to give to a king, even one who is a baby. Gold has immense value, and it is seen as something befitting of royalty. Though a baby couldn't understand its value, his family would understand the significance of the gift. Gold recognized the value and importance of this child.

Frankincense is a less-understood gift. Most of us have no idea what it is, though I know it has become a popular essential oil now, so more are a bit more familiar with it. But frankincense was an expensive form of incense. As a man, I'm not invited to a lot of baby showers (to be clear, I'm ok with that), but I've talked to enough people about them (and having raised children myself) that I have a pretty good idea of the kinds of things you put on a baby registry. I don't think I've ever heard of anyone registering for incense for their new baby. And I certainly don't believe I've ever heard of anyone gifting someone incense either (and trust me, if it had happened, I'd have heard about it!)

So, why would these supposed wise men bring such a strange gift to the baby Jesus? I don't know what their process of deciding on what gifts to bring was like, but I do know there is some theological significance to them. It's possible that God had guided them in their gifts, even if they might not have known about it.

Maybe these were simply valuable things, and they were bringing the best from their lands, but regardless, there is something significant about frankincense being given to Jesus. Throughout the Bible, God commanded that the priests burn incense to the Lord when they were offering their sacrifices. This was to be a vivid reminder that they were

in the presence of God. Every time a person would encounter that scent, it would remind them that they were encountering God.

So bringing an offering of incense to Jesus was actually quite significant. It was symbolic of the fact that not only was this child a king (emphasized by the gold), but He was also God!

Myrrh was the third gift. And if you thought incense was a strange gift for a child, myrrh was probably even more so. Myrrh was a fragrant oil that was used to anoint dead bodies for burial. You might be forgiven for thinking that when Mary and Joseph received that gift, they had to wonder if they were taking part in the first ever white elephant gift exchange. This gift seems more awkward to me than the underwear that grandma would get for you!

But this, too, actually had great significance. Myrrh was symbolic of the fact that this baby lying peacefully in the manger in Bethlehem, was born for a specific purpose—so that one day He could be hung on a cross outside of Jerusalem. It was a recognition that this child was not only a king and not only God—He was God come to earth to offer Himself as a sacrifice for His beloved children.

I'm not sure if the wise men or Mary and Joseph fully understood the significance of these gifts, but I think they ended up communicating far deeper truths than they would have seemed at first glance.

Our Gifts

The wise men's gifts were seemingly strange, but also extravagant. As we consider how we ought to respond to Jesus' birth, looking at their gifts feels somewhat bewildering to us. After all, how can we possibly give gifts to the One who created everything?

The key to good gift-giving is understanding what the person wants and then trying to find a way to get that for them. For some people, that may be the newest iPhone, others may want cool new clothes, still others may desire fancy jewelry. But great gifts aren't always expensive. Some long for things that don't have a price tag: having the whole family together for Christmas, recognition, or simply feeling seen and understood. So as we think about what we can give to Jesus, it bears asking, what would He want? I've got some suggestions.

First, He wants us to recognize what He has done for us. The reason we celebrate Christmas is because of what it means. Christmas was the first step of God's plan to rescue humanity. Human beings had messed things up from the very beginning, choosing to rebel against God and make a mess of the world He created for us. The result of our rebellion was that we became slaves to our sinful natures. We continually rebelled against God, which led to us creating a separation from Him that we could never repair.

Fortunately, God promised that He would send a Redeemer into the world—One who could repair the damage we had done and could offer forgiveness of our sins. He could make us whole once more and allow us to have a restored relationship with God.

This is who Jesus was! This was what He came to earth to do. God had told this to Mary and Joseph when He told them that they would have this child,
And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21, NLT)

Jesus was born so He could die. He died to pay the penalty you and I incurred. He rose from the grave to give us confidence that we too can live, even though we die, and to show us how we can live for all eternity with Him in Heaven. This was the purpose of his coming, and this was what He accomplished. The first gift we can give Jesus is to remember why Christmas matters, and to recognize what it accomplished.

Second, He wants us to worship Him as He deserves. It is fascinating to envision the scene at Christmas. Here are these grown men coming to a stable to give gifts and to worship a baby lying in a feeding trough. Everything about that seems strange...until you recognize who that baby was. Once you get that right, it actually seems quite fitting.

People have different views of Jesus. Many today view Him as merely a myth, an invention of religious people. Others view Him as a historical figure whose reputation was inflated by those who followed Him. And still others view Him as merely a great moral teacher, one who gave us helpful axioms to live by, but nothing much more than that.

All of these views fail to recognize the Jesus revealed to us in the Bible (and the Jesus recorded by history). Jesus was not a mere man. He was worshiped as a baby because the people recognized who this baby was—He was God, come to earth to serve as the Savior of the world.

Understand how insulting it is when we view Jesus as less than He is. There is lots of talk in professional sports about who the GOAT is. Imagine one of these people who is considered the greatest athlete in their sport being treated like nothing more than a hack. Or imagine a King being treated like a peasant. Now imagine God coming to earth, becoming a human being, allowing himself to be beaten and killed so He could save those He created—and what it must be like for those same people to treat Him as though He was just another man. He's not. And treating Him as less than who He is is an insult to who He is and what He has done for us.

This means the way we approach Jesus should be different. We must recognize that He is not merely a legend or story to make us feel better, nor is He an invention used to teach us about how to live. He is God, coming to His creation to save us from ourselves. The appropriate response to that truth is worship. It means following Him and submitting to Him with our lives. We must approach Jesus with appropriate reverence and worship.

Third, He wants us to follow Him. If Jesus was who He claimed to be (and I believe with every fiber of my being that He is), then that reality demands a response. When Jesus called His disciples, His call was almost universally the same: "Follow me." Just as He called His disciples, He calls to you as well: "Follow me!"

Many today believe that Christianity is primarily about a moral code or a list of rules and regulations to follow. I've heard many say, all religions are basically the same, they are all basically teaching a similar code of conduct. If you think that way, I would posit that you don't understand the Christian faith at all. God does not give us a list of rules to follow in order to be acceptable to Him. He's made it quite clear that nothing we can do can make us acceptable once more. We've broken His laws over and over again, and the idea that suddenly following His laws will somehow fix that is ludicrous. So, God isn't giving us a list of rules to follow in order to be good enough for Him.

On the contrary, Jesus calls us to follow Him, to live according to His teachings, to trust in Him because that is the only way to have true and abiding life. Many people imagine that we should follow God's commands out of fear. We do what He says because if we don't, He will smite us or punish us. The Christian, however, does not follow God's instructions out of fear, but out of love.

Jesus doesn't call us to follow a list of rules, but to follow Him. He tells us to stop trying to be good enough, and instead to trust in what He has done for us. The Christian faith isn't about trying to be good enough, but starts by recognizing that we can't be good enough! It means choosing to trust Jesus as our Savior, and to follow Him as our Lord.

In other words, we do the things Jesus says, we allow Him to direct our lives, and we place our trust in Him, not because we think that will make us acceptable to Him, but because we trust Him! We believe He knows what He is talking about when He tells us how to live. We trust the instructions of Jesus far more than we trust the so-called wisdom of our world. We do what He says even when it flies in the face of our culture.

One of the best gifts we can give to Jesus this Christmas is to submit our lives to Him and follow Him. When we recognize what He came to do, and that He accomplished it when He died and rose again, it's the natural response. If that was Jesus' goal in coming to earth, it only makes sense that we should honor Him by following Him.

Finally, we should reflect Him to others. When we recognize the significance of Jesus coming into the world, and we choose to follow Him with our lives, the natural next step is to begin reflecting His love to the world around us.

This is easier said than done. Let's be honest, there are a lot of people that aren't easy to love. There's a good chance you're going to encounter some of them in the next couple of days! Many of us have people who have wounded us deeply and shown no remorse. We would prefer to just ignore these people, not love them like Jesus did.

But Christmas should make us pause for reflection. It should remind us of the love Jesus has shown us. Remember that Jesus came to the world to save people who had continually rebelled against Him. We had done nothing to merit the gift of grace and forgiveness He extended to us. As a matter of fact, our track record has shown that we had no interest in submitting to Him at all! But He came anyway. He loved anyway. And in so doing, He showed us that we mattered to Him.

When we begin to look at the people around us who have hurt us before, who rub us the wrong way, or who we find difficult to love, and compare the hurt we feel to the hurt we inflicted upon Jesus, we see that our hurts pale in comparison. And Jesus chose to forgive us. He doesn't demand anything in return, but the best gift we can give is to treat others the same we He has treated us, because of all people, we should understand the difference such grace and love can make.

So work to change the way you view others. Instead of seeing only the hurts they've caused or the ways they've failed, choose to look for the needs they have, the hurts they carry, and seek to minister to them where they are. Choose to love the people others say are unlovable. Choose to care for those others say are a lost cause. Choose to treat people the way Jesus treated you. In so doing, it shows that you understand and value His gift of forgiveness and new life.

Conclusion

As we sit quietly in this place tonight, I hope you will take the time to reflect on what Christmas really means. It's not about the consumerism that is so rampant in our culture. It's not about a man in a red hat, or elves, or any of the other things that we often associate with it. It's not even about family, friends, or gifts. Christmas is about remembering and celebrating the greatest gift ever—the gift of a Savior, a Redeemer, the gift of a new life.

I hope that this Christmas you will come to recognize what Jesus has given to you. While He came to the earth as a baby in a manger, that wasn't the end of the story. He came to sacrifice Himself so that you and I could be forgiven. He has given us the perfect gift, something we could never repay. Thankfully, we don't have to.

Most of us recognize that gift-giving is not supposed to be about obligation or about trying to match value or anything like that. The best gifts show that we truly know the person and desire to honor them.

So tonight I hope you'll consider what gift you can give to Jesus. He's not looking for gold, frankincense or myrrh. He's not hoping UPS will drop off something really special. Jesus' heart is for you. He came to the earth to give you life. The best gift we can give in return is to value Him for who He is and what He's done. That means submitting to Him, following Him, and sharing Him with the people around us. If we will work at doing that, I guarantee, we will bring a smile to our Savior's face.

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