

The Gift

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. (James 1:17)”

Even in a languishing economy, there will probably be droves of December shoppers. Yet amidst so many swarming cars vying for parking spaces at the mall, I myself wonder, *is this consistent with hard economic times?* Even the availability of easy shopping via the internet doesn't seem to keep the crowds at bay; therefore it looks like the bustle of activity in a setting of twinkling lights, ornaments and Christmas carols is a treasured pastime that isn't going away anytime soon. In fact I can see where Christmas cheer might more valued in a bad economy; if people can't escape hard times, they may want to forget them if only for a season.

Regardless, holiday activity might also demonstrate that it's more blessed to give than to receive. After all, how many in the crowds out there are buying Christmas gifts for themselves? Sure, the breadth of variety in tastes and traditions is wider than many girths will be after eating Christmas dinner but still, building happy memories is a top priority for many and thus worth the effort.

So of course there's soon to be a host of presents exchanged, evoking a spectrum of responses ranging from ecstatic surprise to deep disappointment. And though some gift unveilings won't get the intended delighted reaction, the gracious receiver usually takes pains to stifle any gut-level first impressions that may include the question, “What were you thinking?”

Yet for those overly consumed with stuff, an unwanted gift may actually spawn resentment. Years ago, a story appeared in Dear Abby about a son who received a gift from his wealthy father on an important occasion (not Christmas, but a time when a gift was no less customary). Though he expected a sports car that his father could easily afford, he received a leather Bible instead, his name embossed in gold on the cover. Upon opening this gift, he hardly concealed his disappointment. Rather, he threw down the Bible in rage and stormed away, vehemently thinking, “*With all your millions you give me a Bible?*” Consequently, he nursed his resentment and remained afar; in fact he never saw his father alive again.

Even so when the father died, he willed his estate to his son. Yet by that time the older and wiser son had grown remorseful; when he visited his deceased father's estate and sadly rifled through the goods, he found the leather Bible given to him many years earlier still wrapped in gift paper. Welling up as he opened it, he flipped through the pages and came across an underlined verse, Mathew 7:11. “If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give to those who ask Him?” From the pages fell a car key from the dealer of the sports car he desperately wanted years ago, attached to a tag upon which the words were written, “Paid in Full.”

The bittersweet yarn was widely circulated and purportedly stimulated a noteworthy exchange where someone asked, “Why didn't the Father just tell the Son?” The wiser person answered with the better question, “Why didn't the Son just read the Bible?”

Regardless of how much of this narrative is actually true, it's still a good tale. And one obvious moral of the story is that gifts aren't always what they appear. More importantly, this applies not only to earthly gifts but also to every good and perfect gift given by God. Including of course the greatest, His only begotten Son. And though Jesus was by far the best Gift ever given or received, He didn't enter the world in fanfare or clothed in glory. Had He done so, the entire world would have been awe-struck and no doubt embraced the uniquely born Savior. But such was not the Plan. God doesn't force faith but instead intends it to be a thoughtful choice, born like a flame from the embers of a convicted conscience smoldering in need of eternal forgiveness. Only when the flickers of saving faith are combined with the oxygen of the Gospel can the fire of spiritual life and light from above become lit in man.

Thus the selection of a holy people out from a depraved world means that most of mankind will remain confounded. In this context the Gift came to earth and willingly exchanged his ageless clothing of glory (Philippians 2:6-8) for the swaddling clothes of a baby born in a manger. His humility continued in youth; though infinitely superior to human parents, He nonetheless submitted to their authority (Luke 2:51). Later on throughout His ministry, the Gift appeared as a lowly servant and healed the sick, fed the poor, gave sight to the blind, taught in synagogues and offered God's Kingdom to Israel. But the gracious presentation of the Lowly Servant veiled the eyes of the wicked. Their hardened hearts disdained His humble manner, for He didn't act like the king they wanted for deliverance from Roman bondage. Like the selfish son in our earlier story, their evil hearts were darkened and cluttered with worldly distractions. Therefore, they missed His divinity, as well as their own physical and eternal salvation.

Indeed, the Gift and Creator walking among His creation who refused Him (John 1:11) wasn't unlike the father whose son rejected his gift. Had the boy's eyes not been veiled by a sense of selfish entitlement, he would have valued his father's love above all and appreciated any gift from him. Then great treasures would have been his, including the sports car he wanted. But desiring the lesser material blessings most, He missed the best, a loving relationship with his father. Likewise, those who reject God's Gift miss the greatest blessing of all, the Father's love that includes unlimited eternal wealth. And even if they possess the world's riches, they remain eternally poor without the Giver. Because really, how much can material blessings be truly enjoyed without the spiritual?

So things aren't always what they seem according to God's Plan. Man looks on the outside, but God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7) and calls out for Himself people not assuaged by fleeting distractions but who desire above all reconciliation with their Creator. Built anew upon the foundation of Christ by grace through faith and crafted into His workmanship (Ephesians 2:8-10), the lesser of this world are granted the greater of eternity, including possession of both the Giver and His gift of an everlasting inheritance.

So in a sense with God, less is more. He makes the poor to be rich, the humble exalted and gives the most of Himself to the least of us. And so in the season that celebrates His birth, the humble receivers of His Gift worship in beloved carols that might include the words of a

stanza from O Little Town of Bethlehem:

*How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.*

- By Mary Nixon