

“Christmas: A Time to Receive”

John 1:1-5, 12, 16

11/29/09

Life begins with God’s giving to us a gift we simply need to receive. And when we receive, it changes everything. In order to give anything at all worth giving, we must first receive.

It’s Christmas! Well, almost. But the conversation in our minds begins around this time: “What am I going to give to [you fill in the blank for whomever comes to mind]?”

“I don’t know what to give...I don’t have the money to really give much this year... What can I give that he doesn’t already have?”

There are certainly plenty of advertisements telling me what I should give to my wife if I want to be the good husband. Of course, then I look at the price tag, and well...

And then I was listening to a song by the late singer/songwriter Ray Charles: “Christmas is more than giving; it’s all about receiving the gift that came to us from up above.”

Hmmmm.

I think he was on to something.

Now don’t go building the foundation of your theological understandings on the words of Mr. Charles. I would suggest only God’s Word for that. Yes, of course we are to give, just as we have been given to.

But that’s just it—*as we have been given to*. We have received. And we continue to receive.

“From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

We can get so wrapped up in the “spirit of giving” as we call it, that a simple truth can be overlooked if we are not careful:

In order to give anything at all worth giving, we must first receive.

“Yet to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.”

I think this can be a strange thing to hear at first—you have to first receive. But we must always start out the “Christmas Season” remembering what it is we have been given.

“Grace upon grace.”

“One blessing after another,” as the NIV says it.

Often we preachers start out Advent with Jesus’ words about end times, His second coming and all that He said would be going on. He describes for His disciples what the world is going to look like. And yet Jesus says, “Stand up and raise your heads.”

Stand tall amidst all the strife, because you have received the unshakeable kingdom of God, that which will never be taken away from you.

O the question is: Have you fully received Him?

God has given us the ultimate gift: Abundant life in Jesus Christ.

We simply need to receive it. I know, maybe that sounds funny. It shouldn’t be too difficult. I mean, who doesn’t like to receive a gift? But even with our earthly gifts we can be funny sometimes. It can be hard to receive.

A gift can be hard to accept.

How do you receive? Someone hands you a gift and what do you say, especially if you are not expecting anything?

“You didn’t have to get me anything!” No, I didn’t have to, but I wanted to.

“I can’t accept that.” Why not?

Our pride can get in our way sometimes when someone wants to do something for us. But we have to let that go and simply accept the gift.

When we gather for Love Feast in the Spring, we do as Jesus did and wash one another’s feet. Jesus gave to us in such a humble yet powerful way, and so we follow His example. And in all my years of Love Feast, the most humbling time for me is always when someone washes my feet. I can’t imagine what Peter felt like when Jesus washed him, because when I see the love someone has for Jesus and for me to wash my feet, it is so deeply humbling that it’s transforming.

Having someone else stoop down and do that for me is where I realize the gift God gave to us in Christ—that awesome love that would go to the utmost extreme to give us life by coming to us, as Philippians 2 tells us, *“Who, being the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...and even died on a cross.”*

Why? To give us life.

Yes, it can be hard to accept. How do you receive?

Sometimes a gift someone gives can be hard to believe—believe that it is true.

I think that’s the case for us because we know of all the scams out there and those who say they are giving but only end up taking. We get our hopes up and then it gets taken away.

When I was probably 10 or so years old, as always my family and I got together at my Grandparents’ home for Christmas Eve. And, as always, after the meal (which the adults always enjoyed extending as long as they could to make us kids wait to open our presents and get so excited that we about went through the ceiling) we would all gather around in the living room. My Grandpa would pass out the gifts to everyone, all in turn.

Finally mine came. I don’t know why we put cards on kids’ presents. As a 10 year old boy, do you think I really want to take the time and read a card when I know something great is inside that wrapping paper? Good thought, but you can tell me how much you love me.

Well, this year, as always, there was a card. “Did you read the card?” my mom would ask. Alright. Once my mom was sure I was going to, her attention went elsewhere for a moment amidst all the chaos. I finally got the card out of the envelope, opened it up, and for a moment I froze. My hands started to shake. I think I passed out of all time and reality.

For laying there inside the card, green as could be, promising hope for all time, was a \$100 bill. I had never seen such a thing. At 10 years old I don’t think I knew those even existed.

“Ah mom? Look!”

“Uh, oh,” she said. “That got stuck onto your present. That is supposed to be here for Aunt Lucy. Here, I’ll take that.”

And just like that, the dream was over. The rocket came crashing back to earth. My hopes of a better life were dashed upon the rocks of reality. (Yes, I actually survived—a little scarred, but just fine.)

Yeah, sometimes receiving can be hard because we have been burned in life before. Someone says they’ll be there for you and they vanish when the going gets tough. It’s some of what we heard last week, that the truth is our earthly tables we set for ourselves will eventually be gone.

But God has given us The Gift that will never be shaken—His love, grace, and abundant life for today and all time. That is Christmas. That is where it all starts and what we must first receive.

There is blessing in receiving.

It's not something to feel bad about receiving or scared about, but God's desire that we know Him and the wholeness of life He wants for us.

Before we can possibly give anything worthwhile to anyone, we must first receive.

What do you need to receive this Christmas?

Forgiveness? Healing from past hurts? Freedom from addictions? Peace amidst the turmoil? Hope, when all you're seeing is despair?

What do you need to receive that God is ready to give?

Jesus said, "I do not give as the world gives." No, just far greater blessings if we are willing to receive.

It's what makes your hands shake with excitement when you open it up, but that which no one—no, not even your mom—will take away and give to someone else.

Because if you want to give, as we are called to do, you have to first receive. You have to have something to give.

In Matthew 10:8, Jesus sends out His twelve disciples to preach and minister to the people. And He says, "*Freely you have received, freely give.*"

Colossians 2:6: "*So then, just as you received Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him.*"

How can I love if my heart is hardened? How can I be generous if I am consumed with myself? How can I truly forgive others if I refuse to be forgiven and healed?

How can I be a blessing to others and share the fruit of the Spirit if I have never truly received God's gift of His Son Jesus and His beautiful grace?

The Secret Santa has been revealed—it's Larry Stewart, 58, a successful businessman from Lee's Summit, Missouri. Prior to the Christmas season of 2006, Stewart announced that he is the Secret Santa who has been anonymously doling out \$100 bills to the needy every Christmas for the past 26 years.

Stewart says he decided to go public after it became apparent that a tabloid newspaper was going to reveal his name. Now, he hopes to inspire others to become Secret Santas. So how did this practice begin?

In the winter of 1971, Stewart was working as a door-to-door salesman. The company he was working for went out of business, and he quickly ran out of money. Stewart hadn't eaten in two days when he went to Dixie Diner and ordered a breakfast he eventually admitted he couldn't pay for. Ted Horn, the restaurant owner, sympathized with Stewart. He acted as though he found a \$20 bill on the floor underneath of Stewart's chair. "Son, you must have dropped this," Horn said.

"It was like a fortune to me," Stewart reflected. "I said to myself, 'Thank you, Lord.' Right then, I just made a promise. I said, 'Lord, if you ever put me in a position to help other people, I will do it.'"

Over the years, Stewart estimates that he has given away around \$1.3 million. He says he has been amply rewarded in return. "I see the smiles and looks of hopelessness turn to looks of hope in an instant," he says. "After all, isn't that what we're put here on earth for—to help one another?"

Nanci Hellmich, "Santa Shares His Secret," USA Today (12-22-06); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky

Yes, God has given to us the gift of Life in Christ. It began with God and ends with God. As 1 John 4:10 says, "*In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*"

It begins with God's giving to us, a gift we simply need to receive. And when we receive, it changes everything.

Mary received God's blessing, and it changed her forever as she gave birth to Jesus.

The Apostle Paul received Jesus' transforming power, and thereby gave himself completely in doing all for the sake of the Gospel.

I can't begin to describe how I have been changed through the love of others.

As we enter into Advent and celebrate Jesus' birth, don't be afraid to receive. Receive Him. Receive His grace upon grace. Receive all the fruit of His Spirit. Receive Life. Receive the love and generosity of others.

Yes, then give. From what you have received, give like there's no tomorrow, so that today others may receive abundant Life.

Yes, it's Christmas—a time to receive. Amen.