

What Makes a Gift “Perfect”?

Selected texts

It was a few days before Christmas on the Oregon coast. Two men whose families lived next door opted to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. An unexpected storm surprised the weekend sailors. Before long, the sea became angry, and the two had a difficult time keeping the sailboat under control. While heading toward the harbor, the craft hit a sandbar and grounded. Both men jumped overboard into the icy water and began to push and shove in an attempt to get the sailboat into deeper water. Knee-deep in mud and repeatedly bounced against the hull by unfriendly waves, one said to the other, “Sure beats Christmas shopping, doesn’t it?”

They say you can find everything on the worldwide web. I had not gotten anything for Linda so I googled the phrase, “the perfect gift.” I got 13,100,000 results in 22 one-hundredths of a second. I’m pretty sophisticated on the internet, so I refined the search to “the perfect gift for your wife.” That knocked the results down to 15,300. I didn’t have to look any farther than the Salsa lessons to realize that I was still barking up the wrong tree. The web didn’t really prove to be very helpful

So, what makes a gift “perfect”?

The seed of these thoughts began to germinate two weeks ago. I was on vacation, sitting in another worship service in another state. At the outset, please know that the observation I am sharing is neither a criticism of a fine young preacher nor a commentary on his message. More likely, it is an indictment of my own overactive obsession with the precision of words. In any event, the preacher was innocently describing the lead-up to Christmas at his house. He could not know that a “head-case” was in the crowd when he said something that sent my mind racing.

Apparently, his kids are small and, when buying for Christmas, he gravitates towards those toys and gadgets that will earn him the big “‘Atta boy, Dad!” Mom sounds like the most practical of the pair - more likely to give clothes, socks and underwear. He wanted a show of hands when he asked, “How many of you Dads are ‘guilty’ of buying your kids things they ‘want’ for Christmas rather than things they ‘need’?” I did not raise my hand and NOT because I only buy practical gifts. I seldom do. I did not raise my hand because I do not feel the least bit guilty about often being impractical when it comes to gift-giving. In fact, I would feel much guiltier if all I could think of to give a child was socks and underwear, no matter how badly they needed them.

I am not claiming that I give “better” gifts than the “socks and underwear crowd”, but neither will I concede that I give “lesser” gifts. I simply give gifts that are “imperfect” in a fashion that reflects on me and on the values I bring to my Christmas shopping excursions. Bottom line: Not one of us is able to give a gift to anyone that covers every conceivable important base. Not one of us is able to produce a “perfect” gift, because “perfect” implies that the gift it is always suitable, whole and complete in every way. Obviously, there is no such thing as a “perfect” gift!

Relax, I don’t really mean that. There has been at least one “perfect” gift given in history, and that gift is the reason we have Christmas. What makes that Gift perfect? The short answer is, “God and God alone.” But, you know me. I cannot leave it at the short answer, so let’s examine together what constitutes the perfect Gift and consider how Jesus, the Gift of God measures up.

I. A Perfect Gift Is Needed AND Wanted

It is obvious that Jesus, the Gift of God fills a profound human need. Sin estranges a man from his holy Creator. Paul describes sinners outside of Jesus as "powerless," as "enemies of God," as "darkness" and as "objects of wrath." Jesus appears within the pages of the Bible as the only remedy for sin. He bluntly declared as much about Himself. His disciples boldly proclaimed it:

Jesus said: "...I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Before the Sanhedrin, Peter echoed what He had heard Jesus say:

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." - Acts 4:12

Our need for Jesus is profound. Of course, just because a gift is needed, that is not a sure thing that it will be wanted. Still, after enough blisters and enough cold, wet days, a thick, warm pair of socks could become the most welcomed gift under any tree, especially if a man lacks the means to secure socks for himself.

Likewise, a man needs to grasp his need for the touch of the Great Physician before he will ever crave that touch. There is nothing a man can do to rescue himself from the throes of sin. But, if he wallows in the mire long enough, if he experiences enough of sin's futility and if he comes to the end of his own strength, finally recognizing that he is powerless to secure the life he desires, then, very often, hunger awakens for the Gift of God. Jesus is every sinner's greatest need, but He comes to those for whom He is also their greatest desire. When life's senselessness and sin's emptiness awakens our hunger for God's righteousness, the Perfect Gift satisfies us completely.

II. A Perfect Gift Thrills Recipient AND Giver

One cable network annually features 24 straight hours of *A Christmas Story*. The main character, Ralphie Parker, yearns for "an official Red Ryder carbine action two-hundred shot range model air rifle with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time." But, is that really the perfect gift? Ralphie's mother, his school teacher and even the department store Santa Claus warn him, "You'll shoot your eye out." On the other hand, Ralphie is mortified when his mother compels him to model the pink rabbit outfit that quirky Aunt Clara has joyously hand-crafted. Dad agrees with Ralphie, telling him that he looks like "a deranged Easter Bunny" and "a pink nightmare" before freeing him from his humiliation. Neither the bunny outfit nor the BB gun quite hit the mark of perfection.

It seems to me that if the transaction of a gift exchange is to meet the criteria of "perfection", then, there ought to be some sort of a mutual exhilaration shared by both giver and receiver. The Gift of God does hit that mark. Our basis for joy at the realization that we stand forgiven in God's eyes should be obvious. But, what was Heaven's basis for joy? After all, the Gift required that Jesus, Who in His essence was God, lay aside all the perks and prerogatives of His deity in order to clothe Himself in human flesh. He didn't come as an apparently important or influential man. He was laid in a manger at His birth. His parents were peasants from Nazareth of all places.

Ultimately, Jesus submitted Himself to His Father's plan by yielding to crucifixion, a kind of death that only a depraved mind could have conceived. We know that He agonized with whether or not to go through with it as He prayed in Gethsemane, "Father, not my will, but Yours." And yet, something sustained Him, causing Him to endure. The author of Hebrews identifies that something as the "joy set before him" that enabled him to endure the shame and scorn of the cross. Apparently, God loved us that much and so desired to restore us to Himself that the joy of bringing His Gift of grace to us was enough to warrant the incredible price that had to be paid.

III. A Perfect Gift Is Costly *AND* Free

Did you hear about the guy that bought his wife a beautiful diamond ring for Christmas? A friend said, "I know diamonds are allegedly a girl's best friend, but didn't she say she wanted one of those sporty 4-Wheel drive vehicles."

"She did," the man replied. "But where am I going to find a fake Jeep?"

It would sound crass to imply that a gift cannot be worthwhile unless it is expensive, but we have not been describing the realm of "worthwhile". We have been exploring the realm of "perfect". A perfect gift cannot be a cheap gift, and the perfect Gift of God is far from cheap. In fact, if it is to be the "ultimately perfect" gift, then it must be the most valuable thing the Giver has to give.

... ¹⁸For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. – 1 Peter 1:18, 19

And yet, the grace of God revealed in Jesus is still a gift. The most valuable thing in Creation, the blood of Jesus poured out for the forgiveness of the sins of the world, was freely given.

IV. A Perfect Gift Is Unique *AND* Universally Available

There are many items that make nice gifts even though they are mass-produced and you might have to pull one off of a shelf that has twenty just like it lined up behind it. But again, we are not exploring the realm of "nice" gifts but of "perfect" ones, and it seems that the ultimately perfect gift would have to be one-of-a-kind. Obviously, there is no other gift like Jesus. Four times in the Gospel of *John*, He is referred to as the "One and Only" or "the only begotten" of the Father. John's emphasis is that no one else ever knew the mind of the Father like Jesus knew it. No one ever made the Father known like Jesus made Him known because Jesus was of the same essence as the Father. Jesus is the only Way to salvation, because He is the only One Who *CAN* save us.

Obviously, we would bear no resemblance to Jesus or to the Father if we wanted to keep this one-of-a-kind gift to ourselves. Only a miser would hide away the consummate jewel, or, a Pearl of great price, if you prefer. Typically, such a prize is put on display at a museum for the world to behold. The nature of the perfect Gift of God is not that He can ever be our exclusive possession, but He is ours. Through us, He wants be the prize of all who we can impact for Him.

One-size-fits-all is a quirky designation for clothing. First of all, it ain't so. It accommodates only a range of sizes in between extremes. And, here's a hint for you guys this Christmas. If your wife has put any special effort into getting down to a certain size, learn that size. Don't drag home one-size-fits-all. It won't go as well as you intend. But, the perfect Gift of God truly is one-size-fits-all, and I don't mean it fits one person at a time. It fully embraces all His people together. So, while the Gift is intimate enough to thrill the soul of each believer, Jesus places us into community with one another, and that community is always big enough for one more.

V. A Perfect Gift Is Complete as Is AND Constantly Increasing

“The gift that keeps on giving” is a phrase that has been applied to everything from jewelry to financial endowments to anything that remains useful over the course of time or that even increases in value over time. The Gift of God on the first Christmas is such a gift. There is nothing lacking in what Jesus provided to redeem us back to our Father, and yet, the longer we serve Him, the more the benefits flow back to us: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

The cross of Jesus proves that by grace, God has not withheld from us the very best that He had to give in order to rescue us in our most desperate need. If that is the case, then it only follows that He will not withhold from us anything that we need. If He will give us salvation, do we have any basis for doubting that He will also finish the work of transforming us into His likeness?

³His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. – 2 Peter 1:3, 4

VI. A Perfect Gift Is Imperishable

In the Fall of 1972, I took money I earned from my first job, and succumbed to a fad that was going on among the sophomores at Amarillo High School. I bought a pair of hiking boots even though no one I knew ever actually went hiking. We liked the look. I paid more for those boots than my parents ever paid to buy me shoes. Mom thought I was nuts. I wore them through High School. I wore them when I did actually go hiking or wading in shallow streams. I wore them in inclement weather. Even after I got married, I wore them to shovel snow. In more recent years, they are what I wore whenever I needed to get through snow into this building before the lot had not been plowed.

That’s right; they are still around, holding their own 35 years later. It’s not like I’ve taken care of them, but those boots are just about as indestructible as anything I’ve ever owned. Mom died in 2000, and it never dawned on me to assure her that I probably got my money’s worth after all.

I’m wearing out faster than those crazy boots. Maybe you have some silly little possession that for whatever reason just never seems to wear out. Still, Mom will just have to take my word for it about the boots when I see her again because even though they may very well outlast me, they are not imperishable. Nothing of a material nature is – not a mountain, not an ancient pyramid, certainly not a boot. But, the Gift of God is imperishable and that is part of what makes it perfect.

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. – 1 Peter 1:3-9

VII. A Perfect Gift Is Indescribable

When I had first started this process of thinking about what would be required of a perfect gift, I spent all of five minutes coming up with a list of about twenty criteria that Jesus Christ, the Gift of God, satisfies perfectly. I did a little combining and trimming. I was not confident in your willingness to endure a twenty point message. Obviously, this message has not even scratched the surface of all that factors into the “perfection” of Jesus. But, I also realize that I could have come up with 40, 60, 80 or 100 criteria for perfection and still never scratch that surface.

Paul was writing to Christians in Corinth, urging them to respond generously to a need in Jerusalem where many Jewish believers had become impoverished. A number of factors contributed to their plight. For example, many Jews who turned to Christ were disinherited by their families and economically ostracized by their communities. Additionally, a famine during the reign of the Emperor Claudius created food shortages for everyone.

Paul appealed to the affluent Corinthians on a number of bases. He pointed out the profound generosity of the Macedonians, a people not nearly so well off as themselves. He taught of spiritual blessings that accompany generosity. He observed that those brothers who receive help tend to pray for those who help them. But Paul’s final appeal on the matter directed them to God’s generosity. Speaking of the grace that appeared in Jesus, the Gift of God, he wrote:

... Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! - 2 Corinthians 9:15

All I can hope to accomplish is to make my case for the perfection and sufficiency of Jesus, the Gift of God, without pretending that I could ever exhaustively describe that which is beautifully, gloriously, majestically and infinitely indescribable. If you have never come to Jesus in faith, receive this perfect Gift of God. If you are a believer, rest this Christmas in God’s indescribable gift.

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