

The Gift of Love

John 3:1-21

Without even trying kids can teach us some of the greatest life lessons and when you are a kid you learn some of the greatest lessons in life.

I want to share with you a lesson that I learned as a child. It all revolves around this gift [open gift – take out gumballs and a Milky Way]. Now here is the story behind this gum and this candy bar.

When I was a child, I had saved enough money to do something I had never done before at Christmas which was to buy my parents a Christmas gift. I had saved up a dollar for each parent and my mom took me to a department store and I asked her to go to one side of the store while I went to the other side of the store to shop. There was only one problem with the presents I was about to purchase. I wasn't really thinking about what they would like to have. I was thinking about what I would like to have. I bought them each for a dollar, a long string of gum and a Milky Way. My plan was brilliant. What I knew they would do is thank me and then give me the gum and the Milky Way.

I got home and put each gift in a little box, wrapped it up, tied a bow around it and put it under the tree. Christmas morning we got up and my Mom opened her gift first. As expected she came through like a champion. She thanked me, hugged and kissed me and then gave the gift back to me saying that I could have it. I was so excited!

Now my dad was a very different creature than my mom. Some of you knew him before he passed away. He was an "Old South" man who had lived through world wars and the Great Depression. He was a loving father and one of my best friends, but he had a temper, whatever he thought came out of his mouth, and he wouldn't let anyone make a fool out of him.

When dad opened his gift, he handed me the gum but to my shock put the Milky Way in his shirt pocket. I was stunned. I couldn't believe it. My plan was being blown up. At least you have to give me a "C" for courage, because I looked at my dad and said, "Dad, can I have your Milky Way?" My dad looked at me with fire coming out of his eyes and shouted, "You will not do it!" He pulled that Milky Way out of his pocket, peeled the wrapper off like it was a banana, and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. If you have ever seen clothes going around a washing machine, that's what my dad's mouth looked like. The Milky Way was rolling around and around as he tried to get his mouth around it and down his throat. It is a scene that is burned into my memory to this day.

If you are a first time guest or haven't been here for a while, we have been in a series called "Re-gifted." We've all received a gift that we didn't want or didn't like and re-gifted it, repackaged it and gave it to someone else. All I was doing when I was a kid was just trying to get ahead of the game. I was trying to help my parents out and save them the trouble of re-gifting that gift and I was actually re-gifting my own gift to me!

What we have learned from the Christmas story is that re-gifting is not always a bad thing. It can be a God thing. God gave us certain gifts through Christmas that we ought to re-gift to others.

By way of review, the first gift we talked about was the gift of joy.

"And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'" (Luke 2:10, ESV)

Whatever else Christmas is, it is a time of joy. It is the joy of knowing that God actually came to earth and became a human just like us. Born of a virgin, living among us, dying for us, so that we might become like him and we might live with Him forever. This naturally leads to peace.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’” (Luke 2:13-14, ESV)

We talked about how Christmas brings us peace with God, the peace of God, and peace from God and how we can share that joy and that peace with other people.

There is one more gift that we receive because of Christmas that we need to re-gift and give to others. In fact, it is the greatest gift of all. It is indeed the reason God gave Jesus. It is the reason Jesus came to earth. I want us to read the Christmas story through a different set of eyes today. We are going to go to a gospel that doesn’t share the Christmas story, per se, but is going to tell us why there even is a Christmas story [Turn to **John 3**]

John was one of Jesus’s twelve disciples. He spent three years of his life with him. He saw Him die. He saw Him buried and he saw Him raised from the dead. His gospel is his written testimony of what he had seen and heard in those three years. He has the distinction of writing the most famous verse in the Bible. He tells us the why of Christmas and he tells us the one key word that even makes Christmas possible and that is the word “love.”

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16, ESV)

Everything flows from three words in that verse, “God so loved.” The love that God has given us at Christmas is a love we are to give to others. Key Take Away: Love is giving to the living. Let’s learn today from the greatest lover of all how He loves us and how we are to pass that love to others.

I. God Has Declared His Love For Me

At Christmas, all of us make a Christmas list. Before you can determine what you are going to give you have to determine who you are going to give to. I’ve got news for you. You are on God’s Christmas list. Listen again to these words, ***“For God so loved the world.”***

Question. “Are you in the world?” Then you made it. Do you know what that means? It means that God loves me and God loves you, but it also means that God loves those that we have a hard time loving. God has declared He loves everyone. There is nobody in this world that God does not love. If you are in the world you are on God’s love list. God has never created a person that He didn’t love. That is why He created every person so He could love them.

It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter how many times you’ve turned your back on God, walked away from God, disobeyed God, denied God or forsaken God. God loves you.

In fact, God can’t help himself. John wrote in another book in the New Testament, ***1 John***, these words, ***“God is love.” (1 John 4:16, ESV)***

God doesn’t just love. He is love. The only reason you are alive right now is because God loves you. The only reason your heart is beating and your lungs are breathing is because God loves you.

God loves you unconditionally. He doesn't love you because you are good. In fact, He loves you in spite of the fact you are not. He doesn't love you because you deserve it. He loves you in spite of the fact you don't deserve it. God doesn't love you because you love Him back. As you are going to see, He doesn't even love you because He sent Jesus to die for you. He sent Jesus to die for you, because He loves you.

When you feel the sun's warmth on your face it is God's way of telling you He loves you. When you feel a cool mist of rain falling on you it is God's way of saying He loves you. When you enjoy the beauty of a full moon on a clear night, it is God's way of saying, "He loves you." Every day in so many ways, if you will just listen you will hear God whisper, "I love you."

But, talk is cheap. It is one thing to say that you love someone; it is another thing to show you love someone. God has shown us in no unmistakable terms that he loves us.

II. God Has Demonstrated His Love For Me

"For God so loved the world he gave his only son." (John 3:16, ESV)

God backed up his words with works. Love gives and love is giving to the living. If somebody really loves you then you won't just hear it from their lips, but you will see it in their actions.

Once again, John expands on what he said in his gospel, by writing these words:

"God showed us how much he loved us by sending his only son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1 John 4:9-10, NLT)

God doesn't just declare his love for us. He has demonstrated his love for us by giving his son.

There was a guy who was always telling his girlfriend, "Baby, I love you so much I'd die for you!" Almost every day he'd say, "Baby. Don't ever doubt my love for you. I'd die for you!" One time she looked at him and said, "You know you are always saying that, but you never do it! " God doesn't just say that He loves you. He has shown that He loves you by giving you the greatest gift ever given which was the gift of His Son. He gave us Jesus not only because He loves us, but because He is love.

God has demonstrated, proven, once and for all that He is love and that He loves us by giving His son. Now think about what that means. God's love has really nothing to do with you. Other people may love you because of what you do for them or because you are attractive to them or you appeal to them. God doesn't love you because of you. God loves you because of Himself. He loves you because He is love and He has proven it by giving His son.

You can't influence God's love. You can't do something so good it will make God love you more than He loves you right now. You can't do something so bad it will make God love you any less than He loves you right now.

God's love never wears out. God's love never ends. God's love never fails. God loves you on your good days and God loves you on your bad days. He doesn't love you today more than He did yesterday and He doesn't love you today less than He will love you tomorrow.

Christmas tells us that God's love is final. You cannot go where God does not love you. You cannot do anything that will make God quit loving you. You can't reach the limit of His love, because His love is unlimited. You can't stop His love, because His love is unconditional. That is not just talk. You see that in a cradle and you see that on a cross.

The motive behind Christmas is love. God did not send Jesus because of what you could give Him. He sent Jesus because of what He could give you. Still, there is one other thing that God has done.

III. God Has Delivered His Love To Me

God did not just give His son to the world. He did more than just lay that son at the world's doorstep. He wants that son to be delivered into your very heart and into your very life. Listen to the last part of that verse.

“Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16b, ESV)

Jesus didn't come just so we could all enjoy a Christmas story. He came so that we might have eternal life. Notice it doesn't say, “may have”, “might have”, or “will have.” It says “have.”

In a few days we will gather with our families and we will exchange gifts. We will not wake up, go to the Christmas tree, sit down, look at each other and say, “Now your gift will be here in 10 years” or “Your gift should arrive 20 years from now.” No, we all know that you will get your gift on Christmas Day. You will get your gift immediately.

Some people think that you have to wait until you die to know whether or not you are going to be with God; that you have to wait until you die to find out whether or not you “get” eternal life. John says when you believe you receive. The love that God has declared to you and has demonstrated for you He immediately delivers to you the moment you believe. Can I go back to the other book that John wrote? Listen to this,

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:13, ESV)

Eternal life does not begin for you when you die. It begins for you when you believe.

For all of us in this room who have believed and received, do you understand that just as God did not keep His love to Himself we are not to keep His love to ourselves? Our job is to pass His love on to others who are also willing to believe and receive.

The easiest way to share the gift Jesus spoke of in John 3:16 is to invite a friend or family member to church. An invitation from you may be the most important and lasting Christmas gift you give this year.

The couple was very well off. The husband was a very successful businessman. Though they had quite a bit of money they were very frugal. The man bought the one thing he had always wanted – a Porsche 911 convertible. He treated it like a baby - kept it washed, polished, and always looking brand new. He would never let anyone drive it, but himself.

One day his wife, very nervously, asked him if she could just take it out for a spin. He very nervously agreed, but begged her to be very, very careful. She backed out of the driveway, let the top down and soon was driving along with the wind in her hair enjoying a beautiful day.

She was cruising along and all of a sudden a little boy on a bicycle veered into her path. She swerved to miss him and ran right into the side of a parked pickup truck. The airbag exploded, the front of the car crumpled and glass flew everywhere. A man came running up to her and said, “Lady are you okay?” He helped her out, put her down on the curb and she said, “I am fine. I just need to gather my thoughts.”

Her only thought was this, “I'm a dead woman. When Jim finds out what I've done to his car he is going to kill me.” As she waited for the police to arrive all she could think about was how excited her husband was when

he bought this car. He had wanted one ever since they had first gotten married. This particular Porsche was a rare treasure. He had spent many Saturdays fixing it, washing it, waxing it, and polishing it. He knew every bolt and spot of chrome. Though he was a good and sweet husband she just dreaded the hurt and anguish she would see on his face when he heard the news.

About that time the policeman arrived and he said, "Ma'am, may I see your driver's license and insurance papers?" She walked over to the car, got her purse and grabbed the insurance packet from the glove compartment. She gave the officer her license and she opened up the plastic package to get the papers out. To her surprise, there on top of the papers was a white envelope with her name on it. She opened it and this is what she read,

"Dear Beth,

If you are reading this then you have probably been in an accident and wrecked this car. Don't worry. My only concern is that you are all right, because just remember it is you that I love."

Christmas is God's declaration, God's demonstration and God's deliverance of a reminder, "Regardless of how you may have wrecked your life it is you that I love." The love that God has given to us, if we have believed and received it, must be given to others, because love is giving to the living.