

Date: December 3-4, 2022

Title: *The Great Gift*

Scripture: John 3:16-18

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Well, good morning. Let's take a moment and pray together. God, thank you for the way you've worked in and through Orchard Hill for so many years, helping so many people find and follow Jesus, especially at this time of year. And God, we pray you would do that once again in ways that exceed our thoughts, expectations, and even our efforts. And God, today, as we're gathered, I pray that you would speak to each of us and that your words would be reflected in my word, content, tone, and emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So let me ask you a question. How many of you have your Christmas shopping all done? All right. A few of you. I do. I don't say that to brag. I just say that as a matter of fact. And I do that for a variety of reasons. I've learned after several years of living Christmases here at Orchard Hill, with all of the Christmas Eve schedules, that if I don't do it fairly early in the season, it ends up getting really hard to get done.

And if I'm honest, my wife does 90% of our shopping, so it really isn't that much for me to get done. But the reason that I even bring that up is gifts are a big part of our cultural celebration of Christmas. In fact, if I were to ask you, what's the best gift you've ever received? It may take you a while to think it through, but chances are there are a few things that you would say, oh, that was a spectacular gift.

And if I were to ask you, what's the best gift you've ever given? Probably you could remember that maybe even better than the best gift you've received. And if we were to ask what's better, to give a great gift or receive a great gift you might be prone to say to give because we're conditioned to say that. But it's pretty cool when you receive a great gift too.

And the gift giving is sometimes thought to be tied to the gift that God has given us. Here's how some people would argue this. They would say from Second Corinthians chapter nine, verse 15, where it says, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" And so, what happens at Christmas is people of faith give gifts to remember the gift God has given us.

I don't think that's probably based on the biblical narrative. I think that's probably something we just do because it's cultural, we give gifts. And my point isn't to disparage gift giving. I plan to give and receive gifts and enjoy that cultural tradition.

But my point is this, and that is what some of us do is we try to take a spiritual idea and project it onto our traditions and our cultural celebrations, and I'm not sure that we need to do that.

Here's how Andreas J. Köstenberger writes about this in his book, "The First Days of Jesus." He says, "When you think of Christmas, what comes to mind? Perhaps you think of a manger scene with shepherds and wise men, presents, a Christmas tree, decorations, shopping, relatives, Santa Claus, Christmas cards, snow caroling, or the January credit card bill. Despite what some Christians may want to believe, Christmas is celebrated by many Americans and is cultural and not a religious holiday.

If Jesus were to be completely removed from the equation, Americans could continue to celebrate Christmas with hardly an interruption. People would still decorate their houses and their workplaces, give and receive presents, take the day off work, go to parties, stand in line with their children or grandchildren to see Santa Claus at the local mall, listen to wonderful songs on the radio about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Jack Frost, and World Peace, and watch an endless stream of movies featuring Santa Claus as the main character.

These are some of the ways in which we celebrate Christmas in America, and many other countries have their own Christmas traditions. Christians, of course, may also attend special Christmas pageants at their church and maybe even have some with live animals. But even live animals, however, can't compete with the main feature of Christmas for every child, presents. Cultural Christmas doesn't need Jesus.

There's too much money at stake for retailers to depend upon a first-century Jewish Messianic baby to bring in the revenue. The financial side of Christmas has thoroughly shaped cultural expression, and our economy needs Christmas. What would happen if Americans stopped overspending and going into debt in December? As every economist would tell you, the economy would be dealt a serious blow.

And even families that try to scale it back a bit find it very difficult because of all of the expectations from friends and relatives. Although other countries and cultures have Christmas traditions of their own or at least the American Christmas tradition is synonymous with commercialism."

Now, again, I don't read that to say that's a horrible thing, but just simply to acknowledge that what we tend to do at Christmas is celebrate it culturally and then throw a little Jesus in.

And what I'd like to do today is just talk about the gift that God has given this year and every year for you and for me to celebrate. And as we give presents, although I don't think it's built on the biblical narrative, maybe it will be just a small reminder to celebrate the greater gift in John 3:16.

It's one of the most well-known verses, we're told, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And I believe in this. We see the greatest gift that we can receive and the greatest gift that we can give. And so here is the greatest gift that we can give.

Now the verse, John 3:16 is explained in verses 17 and 18. Here's what that says. It says, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

And this is something that our culture largely does not believe. Our culture does not believe that the world has two different people, those who are condemned and those who aren't. But that's the starkness of the language of John 3:16 that those who don't believe in Jesus are condemned. Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world.

But that's because the world needs a Savior. And Jesus came so that those who believed in him would have eternal life. But in a culture where many of us don't see that need, what happens is we tend to look at a gift like this and say, it's a nice gift, but if we don't think we need the gift, we tend to be offended when somebody tells us we need it or annoyed that somebody suggests it or indifferent to it because we think, well, that's a nice gift, but do I really need it?

This is a little bit like a couple maybe that starts to date in October. And so, the first Christmas is coming, and that puts pressure on a couple because the relationship isn't old enough to know what kind of gifts they should give and how much they should go in. But imagine for a moment that there's a couple that just started dating in October, and at Christmas, the young woman gets the young man who still has a full head of hair, a box of Rogaine. Imagine what he would think. He would think, what is this? Why would I need this? Now he will be annoyed, offended, or at most indifferent to the gift.

And that's how some people in our culture, maybe some of us, look at the gift of Jesus Christ. We think, well, I'm a pretty good person. I'm moral. Do I really need a savior? Am I really condemned if I don't believe in Jesus? But the clear teaching of the Scripture is that every one of us has sinned before God and needs a Savior.

And if we don't come to Jesus, our own efforts aren't enough. Now, for some, maybe it isn't an issue of not thinking that they need it, but they think that they can earn it or get it for themselves. Maybe they say they've made a few mistakes and might need an improvement plan, but they're pretty convinced that their improvement plan will be enough.

But again, if you think that you can get something for yourself, a gift is nice, but it isn't compelling. Maybe that same couple a few years later, now married, and the woman says, now your hair is actually thinning. And so, I picked up a few extra shifts, and got you an appointment for hair plugs. Again, you would be saying, this is my own insecurity coming up, but you'd be saying, you know, okay, what's up with this? I mean, it's nice, but I could get it myself. But when we realize how desperate we are and how stark the language of John 3:16 is, we recognize that we desperately need the gift.

I heard about one young man who grew up in this church. He's now in his twenties, maybe early thirties. And he heard about somebody who needed a kidney transplant, and he offered one of his kidneys. If you're on the receiving end of that kind of a gift, it isn't just a nice to have. It is life-giving. And that is the language of the gift that God has given.

Because Christmas isn't just for good people, it's for desperate people, bad people, because that's all there are. When we sing the song, "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful," one of the things I almost always want to do when I hear that song is I want to say, we should add a verse, and the verse should be, "Oh, Come All Ye Faithless."

Because we don't come because we're faithful, we come because Jesus was faithful, and we become faithful by belief. But we come in a state of faithlessness or a state of being somebody who comes without being right. And it's our desperation that leads to the belief that leads to the greatest gift. And so, there's a great gift that we can receive, but there's also a great gift that we can give.

And what I mean when I say this is the greatest gift that we can give, is in John 3:16, where it says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son or his only begotten son." Some of the older translations say that whoever believes in him, and whoever here is this picture of a gift that can be given to anyone because the

message of Jesus Christ of Christmas is anyone can come, anyone can receive it. And certainly, when I say give the gift, I don't mean that you or I give the gift in the sense of we give it, we just point to one who can.

I heard somebody once describe evangelism, which is the idea of inviting people into this relationship to receive this gift as nothing more than one beggar showing another beggar where he or she found bread. I love that quote, but I think in some ways it misses one thing. And that is as somebody who thinks about bread, if you ever think about it, you think, well, maybe I could earn bread, maybe I could find bread. And so, in a way, it's again, deeper than this because evangelism isn't saying, come and do what I do and be good like me. But instead, it's saying, find what I have found. And maybe a better analogy than the bread is if you found out that the town you grew up in had toxic waste in its drinking water. And that every person who drank that water in the years that they lived there was inflicted with an internal disease that would eventually rot the inside of their body and take their life, but there was a cure. And all you had to do was go to some clinic and they could give you a shot. What do you think you would do with that information? Would you simply say, I got the shot, that's awesome? What you would do is you would say to your family, and your friends who grew up in the same small town, did you hear about the cure?

But the problem in our culture is that so many people don't actually believe that they need a cure because, in our culture, so many people say, I'm okay, whatever God is, like, I'll be okay. And so, part of the challenge as a church is to say, how can we point to Jesus in a compelling way? But one of the true things is that this time of year opens people up in a way that they aren't always open. And so, when we talk about this idea of giving a gift, this is a season of opportunity.

One of the reasons that at our Wexford campus we do 13-14 Christmas Eve services is in part to accommodate all of the people who come. But it's also so that there are days and times when you can be strategic in saying maybe I could invite someone to come to a service. And sometimes, maybe that goes with a dinner invitation ahead of time or an invitation to your home for beverages and hors d'oeuvres afterward.

In fact, in the Gospel of Mark, Mark tells an account of what happens to Levi. Levi was who we know as Matthew, the one who wrote the Gospel of Matthew, but his name was Levi, and he was a tax collector. And in Mark, chapter two, verse 14, it says, "As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him."

So, here's what happened. Levi, the tax collector, and when you and I hear tax collector, we don't love the image. But in the first century, a tax collector would have been more equivalent to somebody who sells drugs to children or traffics children. They were seen as people who had turned on their own countrymen for profit. And so, here's Matthew. And as soon as he comes to follow Jesus, he says, I'm going to throw a dinner party and invite all of the tax collectors and the notorious sinners in my region and introduce them to Jesus. He was throwing, if you will, a Matthew party saying here's all my friends, and I want them to meet Jesus.

And one of the opportunities that you and I have during this time of year is when people are more spiritually open, say, would you come to a Christmas Eve service, service, or an event, that maybe would open you up to who Jesus is in this great gift.

But there's another way that we can participate. Every year at Orchard Hill, we do something that we call Year-End Giving, and by participating in the mission of the church, financially and in service, what we do is we participate in God's great mission. And this year, we had some gatherings in November that we called NEXT where we talked about our next project, next campus, and next opportunities.

If you're new here, the way we have funded what God has done at this church over multiple decades now is by simply saying we will receive and do ministry with whatever money is given during the week-to-week offerings. And then at the end of every year, we have a Year-End Giving Initiative and we talk about maybe what could be and say if you're able to help fund what could be, maybe you could step into that.

And every year what happens is some people maybe make up what they didn't do during the year. Some people have an idea of saying, I would like to give 10% of my income toward that tithe ideal, and I didn't, so, I could make that up at the end of the year. Some people maybe have done that, but God has given them abundance, and so, they say, I could do something else. For some, maybe it's just a first step into giving. It's just a way to say I haven't given, and I'm not sure I'd see that, but maybe I could participate in some way.

And this year, our next project is to build a second story on the Kidzburgh wing. Years ago, when we built that, we put the moorings in the ground to have enough weight to support a second story. So, we're ready to go with that. And you may say, well, do we really need that? But if you're ever down that hall on a Sunday morning, what you see is that the rooms are jammed. If you're here on a Monday night, a Tuesday night, a Wednesday night, or a Thursday night, there are no rooms for all of the different ministries that happen here. And so, that would be a really strategic thing. And a

building is just a tool, but it's a tool that helps more and more people find and follow Jesus Christ.

Now, I've been a pastor for a long time, and one of the things I usually say at this time of year is I want to say to you, if you're sitting here right now and you're saying, we don't need that or I don't like where Orchard Hill is going. I always want to say that is okay. That's fine. Go ahead and pick something else and pray about what God would have you do and do it there.

And here's why I say that. What I've learned in years of being around the church is that sometimes people will have real objections, and sometimes they'll have objections because it's a way to not have to steward resources. And this ultimately isn't about Orchard Hill. This is about you and me simply saying, if God has given me the gift and has asked me to be engaged in helping other people with the gift, then how am I stewarding what God has given me?

And I know some of us may be saying, well, I don't have much, and whatever I give it won't make a difference. Do you remember the story when Jesus was in the temple or near the temple, and he was with several of his followers, and a woman came in and gave her mite? The story is about the widow's mite. It's actually poorly titled. She had two of them if you read it. And the reason that's significant is she came and gave her two mites.

The mite was the smallest denomination of currency and she gave all she had. And Jesus said, you see this woman? She gave more than everybody else. Now, did the temple or Jesus need her mites? Not at all. It wouldn't have made a difference in that sense. But Jesus commended her because he said she gave more than everybody else. After all, she didn't keep for herself.

You see, the spiritual temperature of giving is raised in each of us when we say I will pray about and do what God asks us to do. So, every year we just unapologetically say, if you're a part of the church, would you pray about and do what God would have you do? This isn't just about the money piece of this. It's about engagement. And there are ways to be engaged with our time, talent, and treasure. We have a table in the lobby as well today for Christmas serving. Just an opportunity to say, how can I help pull off the Christmas Eve services at Orchard Hill?

You know, every year around here other than 2020, which had something going on, we've seen in the last ten years, 15-16,000 people come through. That's all our campuses. About 15,000 here at our Wexford campus. That's about five times our

normal weekend attendance. A little more than that, maybe, depending on how you count. A lot of churches do one and a half to two times at Christmas time.

One of the reasons our church has done so well with that is the engagement of so many of you who say we will not just see this as purely family time, but maybe we'll come to one of the services earlier in the week, and we'll bring somebody. Maybe, we'll come with family right around Christmas Eve. Maybe we'll serve at one of the services. And that engagement has allowed people, year after year after year, to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

This will be my 18th year of doing Christmas Eve services here at Orchard Hill. And here's what I can tell you I've seen, year after year, and that is almost every year in January, February, March, April, I meet somebody who says, you know what? I came for the first time on Christmas Eve. I came on the arm of a friend. I came because I saw an advertisement, and God did something in me and began the trajectory of life change. And sometimes it takes multiple Christmases. People say, I came for years, and then there was the one year where I sensed God at work. And the faithfulness of so many of you for so many years has made that an ongoing possibility.

Now, I know that, as I said earlier, many in our culture will say, well, I don't really have a need. I remember years ago when I was in my twenties, and I did several mission trips to some closed countries, communist countries. And the people who lived there literally lived under the threat of potentially going to jail if they spoke about Jesus to somebody who would kind of squawk about it back to the authorities.

And I remember at one point just asking, I said, well, how do you go about telling people about Jesus if this is part of the great commission, what God asks us to do? And I'll never forget this. This man said, we have to live so differently that people ask why our lives are different.

You know, we don't live in a closed country. Our culture may put pressure on us to say it's uncouth to invite people or to push people. But here's the reality, and that is you're not telling people to come and do what you've done. You're one beggar, showing another beggar where you found bread. You're somebody who has been freed from the toxic waste of something that's destroying you from the inside out, saying, I found a way, and you can have it too, even if you don't understand what it is that's happened to you.

So today, the simple teaching of John 3:16-18 is that God has given a great gift that everybody needs and anybody can get in on it. So, have you received the gift of not being more moral but trusting Jesus' work on your behalf? And if you have, are you

committed to saying in some way I'm going to help point others to this great gift and to give the gift that's way better than anything I could buy?

Father, today we ask that you would help us to see the reality of the gift that is really the greatest gift, your Son, Jesus Christ. And we would live in the reality of that. God, I thank you for the ways that you've worked in and through this church and so many who are part of this church for so many years. And God, we do pray that you would exceed our efforts and expectations once again in these days, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.