

“God, Gifts, and Gratitude, Oh My!”

Rev. Jordan McKenzie

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Well in case you haven't noticed we fell back this morning and we're now into the month of November and that means we're not too far away from... gasp... the holiday season. That's right. It's almost here again! Can you believe it?

Now of course when we look toward the holiday season, we often think about one of the greatest traditions in human culture. And that of course is the tradition of gift giving. Across the ages and across societies, giving gifts to each other on special occasions is something that has stood the test of time. We love exchanging gifts with those we care about. Just ask all the advertisers how much we love gift giving; they know how important it is.

But you know, when you really look at it, this whole business of giving gifts to one another is a lot more complicated than it may seem. Because it seems pretty straightforward, we care about each other and so we give each other gifts. But think about all it entails.

First, when you're going to get a gift for someone you have to pick out the right gift for them. And that's often easier said than done. Sometimes it's pretty hard to find the right gift for a person. In fact, I have a confession, I'm not very good at picking out gifts for people. My two go-to items are books and gifts cards to restaurants. That's about as creative as I get. And according to my wife, that's not very creative. Books and gift cards are too impersonal. Of course Amazon is a big help these days in finding something; thank goodness. But it's still not easy to pick out just the right gift. It's sometimes hard to know what a person will really like.

So you have to pick out the right gift. Not only that, but you have to actually get the gift to the person at the right time. And you would think that would never be a problem. When a birthday or anniversary comes around only once a year you would think you'd have that date circled on your calendar and have a gift picked out long in advance. But be honest, how many of you have ever forgotten about getting someone a gift until the very last minute? I think all of our hands should go up. See it's harder than it seems.

So you have to pick out the right gift, you have to get it to the person in time, then there's the whole process of actually giving them the gift. And that can be tricky

too. Cause you can't just go up to somebody and say here's a gift. Some people like to be surprised. And so you have to hide it. Some people hate that. My wife wants her gift first thing no pomp and circumstance. But each person is different.

So you have to find the right gift, you have to get it in time, figure out how you're going to give it to them, but what if you're the one receiving the gift and it's not a good gift. That's a really tough one. You could pretend you like it. Or there's the dangerous option of re-gifting to someone else and hoping nobody will notice. Or you course you could take it back. I still remember from my childhood there's a home video. And my brother and sister and I got a brand new doorknob for our front door for my dad. Beautiful brass doorknob. We had this great doorknob and thought it was perfect. And on the video my dad says, oh, that's really nice that's just what I wanted. But wouldn't you know. The very next day he was out at the store exchanging it. We never let him live that down. So between getting the right gift, getting it to the person on time, making sure you exchange it with the right protocol, and figuring out what to do with bad gifts, giving gifts to each other can be pretty complicated.

Now thank goodness though, that if we're thinking about giving and receiving gifts, the ultimate gift giver doesn't care so much about these things. That of course is God. God is the ultimate gift giver. Kathryn Tanner, a theologian at Yale, says in fact that this should be our foundational understanding of God. That as the creator God relates to us most by the gifts that he's given to us. From the very gift of life itself, the gift of our bodies, our relationships, and most importantly the gift of Jesus, God relates to us first and foremost by giving us gifts. Don't you love that image of God?

Now if God is the great gift giver of course it follows that everything we have is a gift from God. So God is the gift giver and all the things we have are gifts from him. Just look at our passage from earlier. ³ Know that the LORD is God. It is He who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. ⁵ For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

The emphasis in the passage is on God as the provider. That's the crux of the passage that all we have comes from Him. Over and over it says he is the one who

made us; we are his people etc. Everything we have is his. Now this may seem like a pretty uncontroversial statement for us. But in our culture it's actually a really radical statement. What sort of rhetoric do we hear from our culture? We hear it's my right to do whatever I want with my things because they're mine, my body, my country, my church, my property, my rights. My, my, my. We hear all around us in our culture that all the things we have are our own. But the truth is that's wrong. All things are not mine, no they are gifts lovingly given by God.

So we have these lovingly given by God. But you know the greatest thing about God's gifts? They're free. They are given from God's grace. That mean we don't have to earn them, we don't work for them. God doesn't demand a response from us. Just look at this passage again:

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs ³ Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. ⁵ For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

This is a positive passage. It's an invitation. When we remember this God who is this amazing gift giver, giving all these amazing gifts to us, we are invited to celebrate him with joy and thanksgiving. Remember how we're supposed to give? With cheerful hearts. Cheerful hearts. And you can't do that if you're giving out of obligation. No we give out of gratitude and joy. And that's the key to how we think about using what we have as well.

Today we are starting a series where we're talking about how we use or manage all the gifts God's given us. And we usually call that a stewardship series. Where we talk about how we use what God's given us. But Dr. Kent Millard makes a distinction between a stewardship series and gratitude series. A stewardship series or campaign is usually based on the idea that God is the creator of all that we have and we are therefore obligated be good stewards of all that we have. A gratitude series recognizes that all we are all we have are gifts from God but emphasizes that we give back to God out of gratitude.

The whole idea is like those car commercials where its Christmas morning and there's a car in the driveway with a big bow on it. You know the ones I'm talking about? By the way, I just wonder, has that ever happened? Has anybody actually

done that? Anyway, the point is it wouldn't be a gift if the person says, oh I bought you a car, now you have to give me something. No! We give back to someone because we appreciate it! We give not out of obligation, but gratitude. And that is a very different starting point. It changes our attitude because it reminds us we don't ever have to do anything to payback what God's given us.

Now when I think about this, I think about a news story not long ago that I saw. It was the story of the pop star Selena Gomez. If you're not into pop music you might not know Selena Gomez, all kids love her, she's the ex-girlfriend of Justin Bieber. She's a mega star but two year ago she contracted lupus and was really deadly ill. In fact, she needed a kidney transplant and maybe would have died without it. It was a really serious situation. And of course the waitlists are so long. But Selena's best friend volunteered to give Selena her own kidney if it was a match.

Now this was a big deal for her best friend. This was a serious operation. There was a lot of pain, a long hospital stay; she even had to write a will because she might not survive. This was not for Selena; this was for her friend giving the kidney had to go through all this. And she was choosing to do this.

Imagine if someone asked you today, even a friend, asked you will you have surgery and give me your kidney. That's a big decision. But Selena's best friend did it. And of course it went well and in this interview Selena Gomez said I don't know what to do. It's such a gift and all I can do is say thanks. All I can do is say thanks."

And that's exactly how it is with God. Just like Selena's best friend gave her this incredible gift of a kidney, God gives us gifts that we can never make up. The only thing He cares about is that we give back whatever we can with grateful hearts.

Let's pray.