

The Best Gift

Titus 2:11-3:8

This week was my dad's birthday. I was really struggling to find a gift for him – because a gift sends a message. I wanted my gift to communicate my love and appreciation, bring a smile to his face, let him know he's important to me and not just give a last minute "I don't care enough about you to plan ahead" kind of gifts. Those are the gifts that become the "worst gift ever" gifts. You know the one's I'm talking about

- "There's something wrong with you but I won't say it directly" gift. - Bob Kaylor, senior writer for Homiletics, recalls receiving a special kind of soap for acne one year for Christmas from his aunt. He said it was like saying, 'I love you but I can't stand looking at your face.' Even worse, the soap didn't help at all.
- "I really bought this for myself gift." I had a boyfriend in college who bought me an ironing board for my birthday so he could come over and iron his shirts.
- Worthless Novelty Gift – How about a wallet that looks like it's made out of bacon?
- Cheapskate Gift – the free gift that came with something you purchased for yourself. Or whatever random item you find in the bargain bin at the checkout or pick up at a gas station. Frankly, I'd rather receive no gift at all.

There was an article in Reader's Digest "The best worst Christmas gifts we ever got" in which readers shared the most rotten gift they'd received for Christmas.

- One person said "I once received a toilet seat."
- Another received "The book What to Expect When You're Expecting. I was in high school and not even dating."
- "A very nice sweater that someone had worn, stained and re-gifted to me."
- "I got my own Christmas gift back the next year."
(Perri O. Blumberg, "The best worst Christmas gifts we ever got," Reader's Digest, rd.com.)

While these may be some of the worst gifts ever, there's one gift that is the best gift ever given. The gift given to every person with the same message. In sending Jesus Christ into the world of human experience, God sent a strong message about divine love and grace.

Listen to these words of Paul, one of the leaders in the early Christian church, written to a young missionary by the name of Titus.

READ: Titus 2:11-3:8 The Voice

¹¹ *We have cause to celebrate* because the grace of God has appeared, offering *the gift of salvation* to all people. ¹² *Grace arrives* with its own instruction: run away from anything that leads us away from God; abandon the lusts and passions of this world; live life now in this age *with awareness* and self-control, doing the right thing and keeping yourselves holy. ¹³ *Watch for His return*; expect the blessed hope *we all will share* when our great God and Savior, Jesus the Anointed, appears again. ¹⁴ He gave His body for our sakes and will not only break us free from *the chains of wickedness*, but He will also prepare a community uncorrupted by the world that He would call His own—people who are passionate about doing the right thing.

¹⁵ *So, Titus*, tell them all these things. Encourage and teach them with all authority—and rebuke them with the same. *You are a man called to serve*, so don't let anyone belittle you.

³ And remind them of this: respect the rulers and the courts. Obey them. Be ready to do what is good and honorable. ² Don't tear down another person with your words. Instead, keep the peace, and be considerate. Be truly humble toward everyone ³ because there was a time when we, too, were foolish, rebellious, and deceived—we were slaves to sensual cravings and pleasures; and we spent our lives being spiteful, envious, hated by many, and hating one another. ⁴ But then *something happened*: God our Savior and His overpowering love and kindness for humankind entered our world; ⁵ He came to save us. It's not that *we earned it* by doing good works or righteous deeds; He came because He is merciful. He brought us *out of our old ways of living* to a new beginning through the washing of regeneration; and He made us completely new through the Holy Spirit, ⁶ who was poured out in abundance through Jesus

the Anointed, our Savior. ⁷ *All of this happened* so that through His grace we would be accepted *into God's covenant family* and appointed to be His heirs, full of the hope that comes from *knowing you have eternal life*. ⁸ This is a faithful statement of *what we believe*. Concerning this, I want you to put it out there boldly so that those who believe in God will be constant in doing the right things, which will benefit all of us.

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“The grace of God has appeared, offering the gift of salvation to all people.” Paul is referring to Jesus as God’s gift of grace. This is the best gift ever, the gift given to all people.

But this is no ordinary gift. We tend to give gifts based on the apparent worth of the recipient. Not crazy about your daughter’s boyfriend? He might get a \$20 gift card for Walmart, if he’s lucky. On the other hand, our best gifts tend to be given to those we most love and appreciate.

Paul understood, however, that God gave the world a gift that was immeasurably precious, and God did so in lavish measure to **everyone** regardless of the worthiness of the recipient. The truth is, no one is worthy of such a priceless gift since we are all sinners who have no room to boast about our standing or accomplishments before God.

We were born with a sin nature courtesy of our common ancestors, a couple named Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God and rebelled. God is perfect. He can’t be in the presence of sin. It’s just impossible. Like the wrong ends of two magnets. Nothing can bring them together.

But, God loved humankind so much that God found a way to bridge the gap. Jesus was God, yet He was born from a woman’s body and was fully human. Because he did not sin, he was able to be the ultimate sacrifice for everyone.

We deserve the lousiest of gifts, if any at all! But, God gives us only the very best. God gives us Jesus.

Jesus came to save us, this is a gift which God offers us "not because we've earned it by doing good works or righteous deeds – we could never do enough. God gave this gift because God is merciful. **It's a gift** on offer to everyone who will simply unwrap and receive it.

Today, as we celebrate with those are baptized and with those who affirm their baptisms, we celebrate God washing away our sins in the waters of baptism, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. God makes us part of his family, adopts us as his very own, making us heirs confident we will inherit eternal life.

Through baptism, we are invited into a new way of living. Free from the burden of sin, we are invited to place our lives into the hands of God and trusting in God's gift of redeeming grace in his Son, Jesus the Christ.

Back in the Roman world, the timeframe in which the Bible was written, when a gift was given there was always an expectation of reciprocity. No simple thank you note was enough. You needed to respond with a gift of your own. Many Biblical scholars argue that the "gift" of grace works the same way. When Paul talks about the gift, he always expresses it in terms of how we respond.

For example, listen to these words from Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "*God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, [WHY?] so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.*" Here Paul is proclaiming the same announcement of God's gift of grace and clearly includes the response expected of us – we are called to do the good things God planned for us.

The gift of grace in the life of Jesus *calls for the response of giving our lives* -- not just our intellectual assent to the idea of grace, but the actual, practical living out of the gift in our everyday lives.

That practical response to the gift of grace is what Paul is concerned about in his writing to Titus.

Paul doesn't talk about the gift of God as something we just receive and rejoice in for ourselves. The gift requires a response. The gift is given for the purpose of turning us away from immoral behavior and anything that leads us away from God, and encourages us to conduct ourselves in ways that are good and honorable and reflects the grace of God to others. This is holy living.

In a few minutes, the parents of those to be baptized will make a commitment to help their children grow in the Christian faith and life. Those affirming their baptism today will make a similar commitment for themselves:

- to live among God's faithful people,
- to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,
- to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
- to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
- and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

This is a commitment to living in response to the gift of God's grace in Jesus. God's grace motivates us for holy living - 24/7/365. It is this holy living that shapes us into the people God has called us to be.

God's gift is the best gift ever offered. Unlike the worst gifts I talked about earlier, God's gift of grace is exquisitely designed to send the right message to the recipient - we are loved, God desires our salvation, God sees us as worthy. So, how can we not respond to this fabulous gift except by offering our lives in service and faithful living?

And, just in case you're wondering, the gift I finally chose for my dad's birthday because I know this is something he is passionate about – Bibles through ELCA Good gifts - to share the good news of God's gift of Jesus to churches around the world that need Bibles in their own language so they can preach, teach and study the promises of God and share them with others.