

What's With the Gifts?

Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 10, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of
Judah;
For from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2:1-12, NRSV)



I am not gifted in the art of gift-giving. To be more accurate, I'm not gifted in the art of gift-*choosing*. This character flaw is highlighted by the fact that I'm surrounded by people in my family who possess this skill. My wife is one of those people. Her gifts to me and to others are always incredibly thoughtful, consistently the perfect choice. Me, on the other hand,

I'm never quite sure what to get for others. I'm usually not even sure what I want.

I may not be able to find the perfect gift for Esther this year, but I at least want to avoid giving her a gift that will not feel at all like a gift. There is a website I have consulted that helps husbands like me avoid such pitfalls. For example, I've learned from this valuable resource that it's unwise to buy your wife an appliance for Christmas. As high quality as that new vacuum may be, it doesn't send a great message sitting there under the tree Christmas morning. Clothes are also tricky, and if you give them to your wife you better make sure you bought the right size. What does it say to your wife when you bought her a size 10 and she's really a size 6? Exercise equipment can also send a message you may not want to send. A bathroom scale is a really bad idea. This website warns that if you give your wife a scale, she has every right to hand it right back to you.

Along these lines, writer Tim Keller, in his book *Hidden Christmas*, points out that some gifts are hard to receive. Imagine opening a gift from a friend on Christmas morning and it's a dieting book. Then you unwrap another gift from a sibling and it's another book entitled, *Overcoming Selfishness*. What would be your response? If you say to them, “Thank you *so* much,” you are in a sense admitting, “For indeed I am overweight and obnoxious.” Do you see his point? Some gifts are hard to receive because they force you to admit that you have some flaws and weakness, that you need some help. Not all of us are all that eager to receive such a gift.¹

Jesus himself just might be the hardest gift to receive, and one that many people refuse to receive for these same reasons. Today I want to show you why that is, and also why that is a terrible mistake. To do so, I want to use this story of the magi coming to bring gifts to the baby Jesus. There is a lot we stand to learn from this story.

As Matthew records it, sometime after the birth of Jesus, magi from the east saw a star in the sky that signaled his arrival and they traveled to Jerusalem looking for him. That word *magi* is a Greek word used to identify astrologers and fortune-tellers. It's where we get the English word *magic*.² Jews, of course, were

¹ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (Penguin Books, 2018), 16-17.

² John Indermark, *Setting the Christmas Stage* (Upper Room Books, 2001), 67-71.

staunchly opposed to such things, and so these men would have been considered superstitious idolaters and rejected in Jewish society. The Bible outrightly condemned such practices and the people who practiced them.³ These men were looking to the creation rather than the Creator, and teaching others to do the same. The fact that these were among the first invited guests to come and celebrate the birthday of Christ was scandalous, so much so that early on the church started calling them kings, which they most certainly were not, or wise men, which may have been true but is not what the text says about them. If we want to get it right, we should be singing, “We three fortune tellers of Orient are...”!

This is a clear continuation of the message from last week, that Christ came to include the most unlikely suspects in his family, around his table, at his birthday party. That fact shouldn’t surprise us. Prophets like Hosea proclaimed long ago,

**I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’
I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’;
and they will say, ‘You are my God.’⁴**

This is the heart of God. Those once considered unloved, outside of the family of God, are now considered beloved and included. The magi are just one more example. And the way they come to Jesus ought to remind us that God will not only reveal himself to anybody he chooses, but by whatever means seem best to him, even horoscopes, even astrology, even the writings of other religious faiths. Right now, for example, there are countless Muslims in the Middle East who are coming to faith in Christ through supernatural dreams and even by reading the Koran. Now, do I recommend looking for God in horoscopes and the Koran? No. But God nonetheless reserves the right to meet people wherever they happen to be.

As this story makes clear, such revelations, of course, always need to ultimately be confirmed by the written Word of God in the Old and New Testaments. Yes, God speaks to the magi through astrology, but his message is confirmed by the prophesy of Isaiah which the chief priests quote to them in Jerusalem. Similarly, any divine revelation that comes by unorthodox means today must ultimately be confirmed by the scriptures. Still, let’s not imagine we can put limits on who God is speaking to, and how he is getting his message across.⁵

When these magi ultimately find their way to the home in Bethlehem where Jesus is living with his parents, their response is the same as the response of the shepherds, another group of unlikely guests who were invited to visit Jesus the night of his birth. They worship. Our text says that they knelt down, but the word in the original Greek literally means “to prostrate oneself.”⁶ Overwhelmed with joy and reverence, they humbly lay themselves out before this seemingly-helpless baby and pay him homage. And then they offer him precious gifts of gold, and incense, and myrrh, gifts fit for a king. What a scene!

Here is what I want you to see. What is the greatest gift in that place? The greatest gift – by far! – is Christ. Compared to the gift of the child himself, these other gifts of gold, incense and myrrh are mere trinkets. And that’s always the case, isn’t it? Whatever gift we give back to God in response to God for the gift he has given us in Christ, that gift is always meager by comparison. And yet, it is the best we have to offer. As much as I love the old story of *The Little Drummer Boy*, this is where that story misses the mark. Yes, the little boy gives the best he has to offer, a simple rum-a-tum-tum on his drum. That part is right. But the story ends overemphasizing *his* gift, *his* purity of heart, when really the emphasis ought to be on the surpassing gift of the child he has come to worship.

Here is where we get to the point I made at the beginning. Christ is a gift that is hard to receive. Why was this gift given? We know why. John 3:16 declares, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”**⁷ Why did the gift need to be given? Because we are in danger of perishing? And why are in danger of perishing? Because we have chosen a life apart from God, chosen to love ourselves more than we love the one who gives us life, which is sin. And so for you to accept this gift of Christ, you have to admit that this is the case, that you are lost, irreparably sinful, far beyond ever being able to straighten out your life or pull yourself together, so far gone that nothing short of the suffering and death of the very Son of God can make you right. And that, my friends, is not an easy thing to admit, which makes this a very difficult gift to receive.

Most of us are really good at receiving gifts that we *want*. What do you want this Christmas? According to Amazon, the top-rated Christmas gift this year is

³ See Deuteronomy 4:19, 18:9-14, Isaiah 47:11-14, Colossians 2:16-19. *Africa Bible Commentary*, edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo, (Zondervan, 2006), 1136.

⁴ Hosea 2:23, *New International Version* (NIV)

⁵ I’m indebted to the *Africa Bible Commentary* for this insight, p 1136.

⁶ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G4098>

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, this and all other biblical citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).

Apple's AirPods Max.⁸ This technological wonder can be yours if somebody who loves you is willing to plunk down \$479.99 plus shipping. Now, if you really want these headphones, and somebody gives them to you as a gift, my guess is that you will receive them. We are eager to receive gifts we want. What we are not so eager to receive, however, is gifts we may not want but need, because to do so forces you to admit that you are a person who has needs.

I notice this all the time in the church. Imagine that there was somebody in our congregation who ran into a spell of misfortune and lost everything, didn't even have enough resources to put food on the table this week. I can guarantee you that if I put out the word, many of you would line up to help and give. This is a generous congregation, filled with people who love to help meet the needs of others. But what if *you* were that person? It's a different story, right? Would you be willing to humble yourself and let others in this community help you? My experience tells me that many of you would not be eager. We hardly ever have a problem in this church getting people to offer help. We regularly have a problem getting people to receive help. What does that say about us?

Many, many people never really receive the gift that God has given us in Christ for this reason, and we have a great example of this right here in this story. Herod and the religious leaders around him should know that Jesus is the Messiah. These chief priests and scribes were the custodians of God's Word in those days, often beginning their training at age 5! Still, they refuse to receive the gift of Jesus, not just in this instance, but even later one after they have heard his teaching and witnessed his miracles. As John 1:11 declares, "**He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.**"⁹ Notice the 'gift' language. They won't receive this gift. They don't want to admit they need it. They believed that their righteousness, their conformity to the law, their own efforts, their pedigree as Jews, was enough to save them.

They are not alone. Even today, sadly it is often the most knowledgeable people in the church who take Jesus for granted. And yet, as John continues, "**To all who did receive [this gift], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.**"¹⁰ To those who humbly and joyfully bow their lives before Christ in worship because they recognize their deep need for him and the grace he extends, they are the ones who receive the greatest gift (by far!) which has ever been given.

The gift-giving we will all participate in this Christmas season has its origins in this story. The very first Christmas gifts were gold, incense, and myrrh, given by these magic men. Perhaps it has always seemed strange to you that as we celebrate the birthday of Jesus we give gifts to one another. When have you ever been to a birthday party where the ones receiving gifts were the guests and not the one blowing out the candles? I'm not suggesting that we stop giving gifts to one another this season, only that we should think about how we can use this practice to point us back to Jesus, just as we already have tried to use the images of lights and table to point us back to Jesus.

This, by the way, is the problem with Santa. I've already taken a shot at the little drummer boy, so I might as well walk all the way out onto thin ice. For most of us the idea of Santa Claus is rather harmless. And yet, at the core of this figure is quite a harmful warping of the Christmas message. Who receives gifts from Santa? The good girls and the good boys. And in this sense, Santa actually doesn't give gifts at all. He gives rewards. Those who receive something from Santa under the tree or in a stocking have received *that which they deserved, that which they earned.*

Do you see how absolutely contrary that is to the heart of the message of Christ? Now, to be fair, I'm guessing that even parents who go along with the Santa myth for a time don't emphasize this works-righteousness aspect of the story. Still, the message, though subtle, is always present. Do we as parents only give Christmas gifts to our children if they are good? If so, what does that say about our love for them? If we start to imagine that the true gift at Christmas is also earned, that it is no longer a gift, then it is also longer grace. Romans 11:6 declares, "**But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.**"

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that we get rid of gift-giving at Christmas, or even that it's always wrong to bring in Santa. But as Christ-followers who want to retain our focus on the main gift this season, that the one we are celebrating is the one born in Bethlehem and crucified and risen in Jerusalem, we will want to be intentional about doing what we can to let our gift-giving point us back to him.

For one, as we give and receive gifts, can we do so in ways that remind us of the grace of God? This may mean giving gifts to others with generosity and with no strings attached, gifts that are not earned but given nonetheless. This may also mean learning to receive

⁸ <https://www.rollingstone.com/product-recommendations/product-recommendations-pictures/popular-christmas-gifts-2023-1234868328/apple-airpods-max-3/>

⁹ NIV

¹⁰ John 1:12, NIV

gifts from others with humility, especially when we do not feel we deserve a gift that somebody else gives to us. Instead of protesting, or feeling guilty because the gift we gave may not seem equivalent to the one we received, can we simply receive in gratitude? Perhaps we even want to find a way this season to give generously to somebody we might not naturally be inclined to bless, or somebody who will not be able to bless us in return. In all of this, both as givers and recipients, we can practice grace.

We can also find ways to give gifts to Christ, the true guest of honor at this birthday party. The problem, of course, is figuring out what Jesus might want for Christmas. Talk about trying to get something for somebody who already has everything! But he doesn't have everything. What part of our lives does Christ not yet have? What have you withheld from him that you could offer to him this season? Certainly Jesus is pleased with our worship. When we gather like this, or set aside times in private to pray or seek him in the scriptures, we offer something to Christ in response to the gift he has given to us, our version of gold, incense and myrrh.

But the thing I think that Jesus most wants from us is love. Love for him, of course, but also love for those he loves. Jesus often quoted the prophet Hosea who proclaimed, **“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”**¹¹ Mercy, compassion, grace, love – these are the gifts Christ has given us in himself. Nothing pleases him more when we extend these gifts to others whom have also been shown mercy, compassion, grace and love by him.

Tragically, the same thing that makes us resist receiving the gift of grace is the very thing that keeps us from extending grace to others. Pride. Pride keeps us from admitting that we need grace. Pride is also threatened when we consider others better than ourselves and treat them as such. C.S. Lewis once pointed out that pride is the one thing of which no person in the world is free, but also the one thing in the world everyone hates when we see it in another. In his words, “The more we have [pride] in ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.”¹² He goes on to say, “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud person is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”¹³

Tim Keller asks us to remember what we were like when we were teenagers. Do you remember what a

terrible snob you were when you were in junior high and high school? Don't tell me you weren't a snob. I know better. How much did you want to embrace others who didn't dress or act like you, people you considered could do nothing for your fragile social standing? Well, do you think you ever got over that? Most of us haven't. We've just found more socially acceptable ways to express it. Do you look down on others today? Of course you do. We all do. It's in our nature. You may not be a racist, looking down on others who are racially different from you, but do you look down on racists? You may not be a bigot, but do you look down on bigots? You may not be a terrorist, or a crooked politician, or an egomaniac, or a convicted criminal, but do you ever find yourself looking down on those who are?¹⁴

If you receive the gift of Christmas, the gift of Christ which is not easy to receive, you swallow that pride as you admit that you also are somebody worthy of being looked down upon, and that you stand in great need of the grace and mercy of God. This is a gift not only because you then find that such grace is freely given, but also because it sets you free from going around thinking you are better than others. The grace they need is the same grace you need. Suddenly, you find yourself free to give to Jesus the gift that most delights him, loving others as you have been loved.

If you are an obnoxious person and somebody who loves you gives you a book this Christmas entitled *Overcoming Selfishness*, that actually might be the most loving gift you could receive. How much is another pair of headphones really going to enhance your life? But a gift that helps you to become less selfish? If received in humility, that might be the most valuable gift of all. It's pride that makes such a gift so hard to receive.

Pride is the great enemy of grace. Grace is a free gift, but pride will not let me accept it because I did not earn it and therefore can't take credit for it. In a recent article for *The Gospel Coalition*, Jeremy Treat put it this way,

The popular notion is that religion is a “crutch” for weak people. But grace is not a crutch for the weak, it is a foundation for the honest. And if I am honest with myself, I know I need far more than a crutch, I need a new heart. Grace doesn't prop me up, it

¹¹ NIV. See also Matthew 9:13, 12:7.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1942), 106.

¹³ Lewis, 109.

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, “The Gifts of Christmas”, *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus: Experiencing the Peace and Promise of Christmas*, edited by Nancy Guthrie (Crossway, 2008), 41-42).

transforms me from the inside out. We resist grace because we want the glory.¹⁵

I want to invite you to ask yourself this vitally important question this morning. Have you ever truly received the gift of Christ? Isaiah 9:6 declares, **“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”** Christ is a gift given to you that is freely given. But it is not forced upon you. Like any gift, it must be received, and in this case received by one who has come to realize it is not deserved, but desperately needed. Have you ever come to the place in your life where, in the sobering knowledge that you simply cannot manage your own life, you simply let go of pride and, like those magi so long ago, fell prostrate before Jesus in humility and joy, and offered to him the best that you have?

Of all the gifts you receive this season, the most precious one by far is the gift you have been given in Christ. Of all the gifts you might possible give this season, the most precious one you might give is your life back to him in response.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 2:1-12. It’s likely a familiar story so pay attention to see if you can find something you’ve never noticed here before. What stands out to you?
2. What do we make of the fact that God chooses to reveal himself to pagan astrologers through the movement of stars?
3. These “magic men” make an incredible journey to discover a king they know little about, and when they meet him they are not just glad, but “overwhelmed with joy” and prostrate themselves before Jesus and offer him gifts of great value. What’s going on here? Why such a tremendous response?
4. What would be your response if a friend or family member gave you a dieting book or a book entitled *Overcoming Selfishness* for Christmas? Would you receive it with gratitude?

5. Is it easy for you to receive help from other people when you need it? Why or why not? What does this tell you about yourself?
6. Tim Keller writes, “There has never been a gift offered that makes you swallow your pride to the depths that the gift of Jesus Christ requires us to do.”¹⁶ Why is that? Do you agree?
7. How might we redeem the practice of giving and receiving gifts this season? What is one way you can allow this practice to point you and others back to Christ?
8. What is the main thing Jesus is saying to you through this message? How does it change the way you think and live?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Why do we give gifts to one another at Christmas when it’s Jesus’ birthday party?

¹⁵ Jeremy Treat, “Grace is Not a Thing”, *The Gospel Coalition*, May 29, 2014. Read online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/grace-is-not-a-thing/>

¹⁶ Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, 17.