

Responding to the Greatest Gift
April 1, 2018

I have two questions for you this morning. These are intended to get you thinking about great gifts. The first question is this. What was your favorite gift, or the best gift, you have ever received from another person?

Maybe you received this gift on a birthday, at Christmas, or for graduation. Maybe it was a wedding present. Maybe you received a car, a college education, a job offer, a favor, a loan, or a piece of jewelry. Maybe you received a trip or a house. I know someone who received a house as a gift. There are many things on earth you might receive as a gift from someone else.

The second question is this. "How did you respond to the person who gave you this gift?" In some cultures when someone gives you a gift, you have to give them a better gift. Maybe you did that. Or maybe you wrote a very nice thank you note and mailed it to the person. Or maybe you simply said, "Thank you" very enthusiastically over and over and over. Or maybe you pledged friendship or loyalty to the giver. There are several ways to respond to a great gift.

In today's Bible passage we see the greatest gift anyone can receive. We are also told how we should respond to the giver of this gift. We are in Paul's letter to the church at Rome.

Romans 12:1 (NIV) Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy...

The great gift that Paul is writing of here is the mercy of God. The word **mercy means to refrain from harming or punishing someone.**

As sinners against God, we all deserve death and hell. That is what we ought to receive for sin. Hell is a place where no one ever again receives the blessings of God. Imagine a place where no one is happy, no one smiles, no one laughs. There is no love in hell, no friendship, no satisfaction in the things you do. There is no sunshine in hell. It is a dark and dreary place. People are filled with regret and anguish. And it is a place without hope of anything better. Try to imagine being in such a place forever and ever.

Earth is temporary. Hell is forever. Hell is what we deserve for our sin against God. Sin pushes God away. So hell will be a place where God is permanently and fully away from you.

But hell is not what God wants for us. God wants us to fully and completely accept Him and all the blessings He has for us. So out of love for us, God has offered us mercy, a GIFT of mercy. Instead of hell God offers us eternal life with Him.

He was able to do this through Jesus who died for our sins, in our place. We know this is the focus of the mercy Paul writes of because it has been his subject through the whole book, as it was a few verses previous.

Romans 11:30 (NIV) ... you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy...

I contend that this mercy is the greatest gift anyone can receive. Let me suggest several reasons for believing it to be the greatest gift anyone can receive.

First, this mercy is the greatest gift because it has met our greatest need.

Jesus paid for us the huge sin debt we owed to God. Some of us are paying mortgages of thousands of dollars. It can take many years to pay these off. Fortunately they can be paid off with money. And most of us will be able to eventually pay them off.

There are nations in the world that are in debt for billions of dollars. Our own nation is one of these. Most of these will never be able to pay off the debt. The debt is too large. Their income is too small. Our own nation is likely already past the point of being able to pay the debts we owe. And we are getting deeper every day. Currently our national debt is over 21 trillion dollars. That is \$173,000 per tax payer. The interest alone is nearly \$288 billion. And it is growing every second. You can check it out at www.usdebtclock.org. It is more than our country will likely ever be able to pay.

Our personal sin debt is already huge and is growing day by day. Every day we fail to make God the center of our lives, our words, our actions, our desires. Every day we add to the amount of our sin. It cannot be paid off in money. It cannot be paid off in doing good. The only thing that will pay your debt is death. You have to die. Or someone else can die for you. However, it must be someone God is willing to accept in your place.

This is what we have in Jesus. Jesus died in our place. And God accepted His death as full payment for our sin. In fact, God Himself sent Jesus for this purpose.

John 3:16 (NIV) 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.

Jesus paid the huge debt that we could never pay. That is reason number one that God's mercy is the greatest gift. It met our greatest need.

The second reason God's mercy is the greatest gift is because of what it cost.

Looking back at John 3:16 we can see that it cost Jesus His life. One way of setting value on a gift is what it means for us. That was the first reason I gave you. A second way of setting value on a gift is how much it cost the giver of the gift. God's gift of mercy cost Jesus His life. He made the ultimate sacrifice. A man's life is a high price to pay for a gift.

And the third reason God's mercy is the greatest gift is because of how long it lasts.

A car will wear out. A necklace might get broken or stolen. Money gets used up. In addition, any earthly thing someone gives you is only for use on earth. As the saying goes, "You can't take it with you." You could have it buried with you or put in your coffin

if it is small enough. But it will not enter heaven, or hell, with you. Any gift that someone could give you here is only temporary. It is only for here.

In contrast, the gift God is offering has lasting value because it is the gift of eternal life. It starts here and will be completed in heaven. Once you have been given this gift, it is yours. Your name goes into Jesus' book of life. Your completed salvation is kept in heaven for you.

This gift will not rust or diminish while you live here on earth. It cannot be stolen or borrowed. It cannot be destroyed, marred, or delayed by the actions of anyone else. And it will be last forever.

So God's gift of mercy is the greatest gift because it met our greatest need, cost Jesus his life, and will last for eternity.

Now we come to the point Paul makes about how to respond to God for giving us such a great gift. **How are we to respond to God's mercy?**

Romans 12:1-2 (NIV) Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

How are we to respond to God's mercy?

1. Live every day for God.

An animal sacrifice can only be offered once. If the animal was a goat, you could not offer the same goat the next week. Since the goat died, it could not be offered again. You could offer a different goat, but not the same one.

But a living sacrifice can be offered over and over. That is what Paul means. Offer yourself continuously to God. Give yourself to God in prayer and then obedience. Give yourself to His kingdom, to His rule over you. Give yourself to His truth, His commands, His purposes, His values.

A sacrifice is called a sacrifice because you give up something. You must give up you. You must die to self. Give yourself to God. Give yourself completely to God. This is what holy means.

The word **Holy means entirely given to God**. To be holy you must commit your whole self, your whole life to God. Just giving Him some of you is not a good enough response to the greatest gift. Going to church on Sunday is a very small way to express your appreciation for the greatest gift. What God is really looking for from us is that we be offering ourselves as living sacrifices, living with Him and for Him all day. Give your heart to God. Give your mind to God. Give your desires to God. Give your love to God.

2. Reject the values of the world that conflict with God's will.

As we read the Bible, pray, are led by the Holy Spirit, and spend time talking about God's will with other Christian, we learn the differences between the world's values and God's will.

3. We must be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

What we think and believe needs to change. What we think about sin and salvation needs to change. What we think about the world needs to change. What we think about God needs to change. It is not first our outward behavior that needs to change. What first needs to change is what is on the inside of us.

Much of what we believe about God and sin has come to us from the world, from songs, from cartoons, from novels, from word-of-mouth, from tradition. And much of this is wrong. We must learn the truth as God has presented it to us. We must get rid of the false in our minds and replace it with truth.

Our minds are renewed as we continuously learn about sin and salvation.

Our minds are renewed as we continuously repent of sin.

Our minds are renewed as we continuously pray honestly about our sin.

Our minds are renewed as we continuously follow Christ away from temptation and sin. Jesus says, "If you love me you will obey me."

We were born sinners. Sin comes natural to us. No one had to teach us to sin. Instead, we have to learn how to give ourselves to God.

We have grown up as sinners in a sinful world. The values of the world bombard our eyes, our ears, our brains, and our hearts every day. We easily believe these values and false teachings about what is good and true. We have much to unlearn. While we also have much to learn of the truth.

If you are not a Christian, you can choose to receive God's gift of mercy today. God is offering it to you. Jesus died to pay YOUR sin debt too! He is holding His gift of mercy out to you, if you will accept it. Do you want this gift? Then now is the moment to tell God you want it. Now is the moment to say, "Yes, God, I will accept this gift of forgiveness and eternal life, based on the death of Jesus."