

Misunderstood Gifts

Christmas time is a time for gift-giving. It may be helpful to use this occasion to reflect on gifts. I have in mind two levels of gifts, personal and national.

Let's first think about gift-giving in today's society. We give a gift in special wrapping paper, perhaps with a ribbon on it. Why? Tradition perhaps. But the wrapping paper serves two purposes: it identifies whatever is inside *as a gift*. It's not like the things we buy at a store and came home in a shopping bag. It's special. And the wrapping paper hides what's inside. So there's surprise when the recipient sees what the gift is.

We give gifts mostly at Christmas time and for birthdays. They're given in love or in appreciation for something. There's a connection of some kind to the person the gift is for, such as a family member or a dear friend. Gifts thus express kindness and generosity. Wedding gifts, bar mitzvah gifts, and a hostess gift when invited to a dinner party, in contrast, are expected. We wouldn't even think of attending one of these events without taking a gift of some kind, because to go without a gift would be an offense. So whatever it is that's given in those circumstances isn't really a "gift" but a fee.

Gifts are given purposefully. That may seem obvious. But to us today, giving a gift to someone is something special that we do. We think about the recipient and what that person would like to have (or maybe not have). Gift-giving isn't accidental or random. Because gifts are intentional, recipients use the gift appropriately. That's because the giver and the gift remain permanently linked. If my mother-in-law gave me the gift of a casserole dish, every time I use it I remember her, and I'm not going to use it to start tomato seedlings. A gift of cash isn't a gift, it's a fee paid.

We say "Thank you" when we receive a gift, but most of our "Thank you's" come out so automatically that they carry little meaning. "Thank you" is a thoughtless reflex, built into us in childhood. We say thank you even for trivial things. We might even say "Thank you" for a gift we don't want. "Thank you" is proper and essential social etiquette. Our depth of gratitude probably depends on how much sacrifice we know was needed to make the gift. The attempt to pay for a gift totally destroys everything involved in giving the gift. It nullifies the love behind the gift and it absolves the recipient of obligations. (This is part of the reason self-righteousness is rife in the church.) The worst form of ingratitude for a gift is forgetting it altogether; if that happens, it's as if the gift had never been given.

All gifts require a response. Gifts need to be repaid – in the proper time of course and in the proper way. Reciprocity of some kind is expected for most gift-giving. This means that gifts are almost always associated with self-interest. For example we may expect pay-back some day or some other kind of benefit may be expected in return, such as perhaps a deeper or more intimate relationship. Another benefit from gift-giving is the good feeling we have of being generous.

This last observation is critically important: Gifts create obligations. The film "Jeremiah Johnson" tells the true story of a mountain man who lived in the wild West in the 19th century. In this 1970's movie, Johnson is played by Robert Redford. As the story develops, Johnson gives a gift to a certain Indian chief. The gift was very special to that chief, so much so that he was under obligation to make a very special gift to Johnson in return. The gift in return had to be commensurate in value to the gift received. So the chief gave him his daughter in marriage.

Cultural anthropologists have studied gift-giving in modern non-Western (tribal) cultures as well as in societies of Bible times. Gift-giving in those cultures had legal, economic, political and religious as well as social importance. Gifts were to maintain relationships within their society. Gift-giving even was mandatory in certain situations, as were the receipt of the gift – and the obligations that the gift created. To refuse an offered gift was a serious offense. It meant rejecting friendship or a relationship, which meant that person wanted to be an enemy, so war would ensue. Throwing a banquet would be like gift-giving, where the host would display great generosity to his guests, and much honor would accrue to him as a result. And those guests were equally under obligation to the host to repay him in the future in some way. The whole feudal system during the medieval era was based on gift-giving: those uppermost in society's hierarchy gave gifts to those lower down, creating the obligations of loyalty and service. Thus, giving gifts both created a power structure and maintained peace. There's a principle in all this: Gratitude is as gratitude *does*.

We today don't understand gifts. No gift is totally free. All gifts impose obligations of some kind. They require a response. They serve as the basis of a relationship and there's the expectation of gratitude. God's gifts and blessings are offered to us in transcendent, infinitely pure love, but that doesn't make them free. I think that many people reject the Gospel because they understand that, as a gift, there's the expectation of something in return that they don't want to comply with, such as living according to His will. Because God is an infinite Being, we do not, indeed cannot, repay Him.

Most Christians, I suspect, suppose that salvation is a totally and absolutely free gift. “Hey, that’s what grace is. It’s free!” But if that were so, why then does Paul write chapter after chapter of text, imperatives mostly, telling Christians how they’re to be and what they’re to do. And when Peter presents the Gospel in Acts 2, he says that a necessary component of the Gospel *is our response*. Look what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: **“You are not your own; you were bought at a price...”** (6:19-20), and **“he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price”** (7:22). We exult in Ephesians 2:8-9, that salvation is a gift, but we ignore the verse that comes right after it: **“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** I am not arguing that we need do anything in any way in order *to be saved*; rather, it’s that *having been saved*, we are under obligation. No gift is free. God cares very much *how* the gift of salvation is received. Salvation comes with both privileges and responsibilities.

Now let’s think about gifts on the larger national scale. America is certainly exceptional, having received a plenitude of unique blessings from God. But the blessings I refer to, such as peace, prosperity, political liberties, the rule of law, and the freedom of self-determination, were only a “gift” in the sense that they were given by God. But they weren’t a gift in the sense that they then freely belonged to the recipients to do with as they pleased. So Americans have made an absolutely massive error: We misunderstood *totally* the very nature on which our nation was founded. God gave us the independence and the attendant political blessings to carry out His great purposes, not so that we could indulge them in self-exaltation and in the “pursuit of happiness.” The blessings were given in trust.

Prior generations of Americans did, to a great extent, serve God in the way He intended. That was when Americans were a God-fearing people. Not ideal, OK. But Christianity and serving God in some way were part of being American. No more. Now we deliberately murder our unborn children, we believe and teach anti-theistic lies such as Darwinism and billions of years, we repudiate biblical marriage, and except for a small subgroup for two hours on Sunday mornings, we ignore God and His will almost totally. Nearly all Americans in any leadership position (in media, in education, in government, and in the finance and corporate world, for example) despise God, His commandments, and His Son; those who say they believe in God are almost certainly deists. Few church-goers care any more about missions or evangelism.

So by subterfuge and stealth, by cheating and lying, the Democrat Party “won” the recent Presidential election. A political party that seizes power illegitimately can be expected to rule tyrannically. A safe bet is, things will now get ugly. But this election outcome wasn’t just the expected failure of democracy (although it certainly is that; democracy had to fail sooner or later because of humanity’s sin nature). No, it’s more. It’s God’s hand of judgment. It’s His removing the blessings that were given in trust, because that trust was betrayed. In other words, the blessings were not an irrevocable gift, as Christians smugly presume.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel presumed upon God. The land, the peace, the prosperity, all these were misunderstood as free gifts. The Israelites thought that God’s blessings were unconditional. They sure got that wrong. **“So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess”** (Deuteronomy 5:32-33; see also Deuteronomy 28). The blessings were *explicitly* conditioned on their continued love of God and obedience to Him. Well, they disobeyed. It’s a major theme of the Bible. The blessings that God bestowed were therefore revoked. It was ugly.

We in America are repeating that story of what happened to Israel. Most Americans today don’t even see the blessings of peace, prosperity, and freedoms as having come from God. “Those are inherent human rights. We don’t need to invoke God for them,” they foolishly assert. Even most Christians have lost sight of God as the source of those blessings. We simply take them for granted, as if, because we’re Americans, we have a right to them. The gifts to America were never free. They were given with obligations implicitly attached. So those gifts and blessings are revocable.

The same holds for the salvation on offer thru the Gospel. I am not arguing that salvation is revocable. Rather, that salvation necessarily entails the obligations of a relationship with God and of service of some kind to Christ and to people in need. It entails the obligations of personal holiness and of practical, righteous living. It entails *a lot!*

Love gives gifts. Great love gives great gifts. Jesus is God’s great love gift to humanity. He came offering forgiveness of sins, justification, sanctification, adoption by God and eternal life in God’s presence. No greater gift is conceivable. As children of God, we’re here to join the Spirit of God in lovingly extending that gift of salvation to others. We do that by sharing the Gospel in one way or another. That’s why we’re here. So let’s do it.