

We Need Presence More Than Presents

Just a few short days until Christmas day....some of you have already had Christmas gatherings with different parts of the family. How many of you have already given or received presents?

Many people like to give presents....but almost everyone likes to receive them. Last year I preached an entire message about the gifts. Whether or not you think exchanging gifts is ok doesn't matter to me, that's your call.

What does matter to me is the heart behind the gift giving (and receiving). If gift giving causes you to sin, maybe you should avoid it. If you spend so much money that you have to take out a loan, deplete your savings, not pay bills, not give as much in offering or tithe, then maybe you need to check your priorities because it sounds like Jesus isn't at the top.

But typically at the heart of gift giving is the desire to bless others. To give them something they might not think to purchase for themselves, to give them something they need, to give them something maybe they don't have the means to purchase.

Unfortunately in many homes, even Christian homes, Christmas has become more about the presents that we exchange than about Jesus, the greatest gift ever given....and available to all!

Too often people seek presents instead of presence. Church, that should not be so! Today's message is "We Need Presence More Than Presents"

Let's start with Matthew's account of the wise men.

Matthew 2:1-11 (NKJV)

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler

Who will shepherd My people Israel.”

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.”

9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Great story, I've also heard it this way....I read this story about a church Christmas program. There were three six year old boys playing the wise men. As they came up to Mary and Joseph at the stable, the first one handed over his present and said, “Gold.” The second presented his gift and said, “Myrrh.” The third one then gave them his treasure and said, “And Frank sent this.”

Get it??? Gold, Myrrh, Frankincense! (Frank sent this)....

OK, back to the true biblical account. These wise men travel a great distance for quite a long time following the star until they had reached Jesus. Jesus was around 2 years old when they got there.

Why did the wise men travel so far? Sure they had gifts for this child but were these gifts so great that they just had to deliver them personally? We don't know exactly how long they followed this star but we do know it was a very long time and a very long journey....

The gifts they brought **did** have significant meaning.

- Gold represents His royalty
- Frankincense represents His divinity and relationship to the priesthood
- Myrrh was a perfume used in embalming. It represented His coming death for the world

The wise men were obedient and prophetic! But they didn't just make this long journey because these presents they had were significant. It was a desire not to give presents but to honor Jesus with the sacrifice of their presence.

Can you imagine how much of a sacrifice it was to take this long trip, likely on a camel, probably riding at night, sleeping during the day...they were following a star, remember.

They understood that while presents are good, presence is better. Presence makes presents better!

You know for most people as they get older, life gets more complex so the holidays get more complex. You or someone else in your family get married, then someone can't be at the birthday or Christmas party. So they mail a gift or send it with someone else to get it to you.

You know it's just not the same when you open a present and you are not in the presence of the one who gave it. Was the gift any less thoughtful? NO. It cost the same, the same time was spent picking it out, wrapping it, etc. But without presence, the present is lacking something.

The wise men coming was important, Jesus doesn't just want what you have to offer Him, He want's you....your presence! Presence actually is more important than presents.

Ask the men and women serving our country away from home what they would like to have for Christmas.....and they no doubt would say.....I'd like to be home. I'd like to be with my family! Ask their wives, husbands, children, and parents the same, and I believe you'd receive the same answer! Oh....I'd give anything if they were home!

Ask the thousands, and thousands of children in orphanages, and foster home what they would like to have, and I believe most would like to have a family! They don't just want presents, they desire someone's loving presence!

Many of the best memories in my life are about time that was spent with me, not about things that I was given. I wouldn't have thought that then....but now it's what I cherish.

If you were to ask young children what would they prefer.....a new toy they have been wanting or a some time playing with mom or day.....most would answer without hesitationgive me the toy!

But 20 years from now the thing that will mean the most, and be remembered the most will be your "presence" with them, and not so much your presents to them.

Again, presents are nice, I'm not knocking them....

Matthew 7:11 (NKJV)

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

He's a good, good, Father. He's a giving Father. He loves you and He loves to give you gifts or presents! Let's look at a few...

How about salvation? It's a gift! It's what we truly should be celebrating this season. Christmas is not just about a miraculous birth, but a miraculous birth of a Savior!

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV)

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Not only is salvation a gift, but so is the grace that is extended to you by which salvation is offered, and so is the very faith that you proclaim in Jesus. Grace, faith, salvation....all gifts from God! There is NOTHING that you can do to earn it...so you can't take any credit for it!

Jesus was born of a virgin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, lived a sinless life, died on the cross, defeated hell, death, and the grave, and ascended to heaven.....as a free gift to sinful a world and people. Nothing you can do to earn it....

And if you have messed up and think there is no hope for you, you have let Jesus down too many times....I've got news for you!

Romans 11:29 (AMP)

29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable [for He does not withdraw what He has given, nor does He change His mind about those to whom He gives His grace or to whom He sends His call].

Praise Jesus!

You would think that would be enough, but God is generous, He gives abundantly! There are more gifts to be opened! Have you ever been at a birthday party where it seems like the gifts never end? I've seen many little kids get tired of opening gifts.

Personally I don't think I'd ever get tired of opening them....God has so much for you that you will NEVER get it all unwrapped! Do you receive that today???

In the church we talk a lot about the gifts....

- **Gifts of the Father** - gifts to every person, motivational gifts, Romans 12 (prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, mercy)
- **Gifts of the Son** - gifts to the church, enablers/equippers, Ephesians 4 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers)
- **Gifts of the Holy Spirit** - gifts available to believers, they are for serving the church, 1 Corinthians 12 (wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation)

The truth is....we serve a gift giving God. We serve a God who blesses and loves to give!

1 Corinthians 12:31 (NKJV)

But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

We should desire the best gifts! But then Paul goes on to tell us about love. I've preached and entire message on this before. He tells us to desire the best gifts.....but then Paul reminds us that without love.....they are worthless.

Can I tell you a secret? You really can't love without the presence of God.

1 John 4:8 (AMP)

8 The one who does not love has not become acquainted with God [does not and never did know Him], for God is love. [He is the originator of love, and it is an enduring attribute of His nature.]

So if God is love, and the if the gifts of God are worthless without love, then the gifts are worthless without God's presence....did you follow that?

Listen, presents are good, even great, but we need presence more than presents. It's His presence that gives the presents worth!

Oswald Chambers wrote: "It is not God's promises we need, it is [God] Himself."

Why do we need His presence so badly? What do we find there?

1. Forgiveness in His presence

2 Kings 13:23 (NKJV)

23 But the Lord was gracious to them, had compassion on them, and regarded them, because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not yet destroy them or cast them from His presence.

Psalm 17:2 (NKJV)

2 Let my vindication come from Your presence;
Let Your eyes look on the things that are upright.

Jesus died on the cross so that you can be forgiven. Outside of His presence is where you feel guilt, shame, condemnation, and the reality is that outside of His presence is where we sin. But IN His presence, we find grace, we find love, we find forgiveness.....

2. Joy in His presence

Psalm 16:11 (NKJV)

11 You will show me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 21:6 (NKJV)

6 For You have made him most blessed forever;
You have made him exceedingly glad with Your presence.

We are told that the joy of the Lord is our strength. There are many things that happen in life that make it hard to be joyful. But the reason those things cause us misery, is because we focus on them instead of Jesus. When you get in His presence, you WILL find joy.

There is probably someone in your life that as soon as you see them, you feel joy, right? No matter what is going on, no matter how bad you feel, when they are present, you are uplifted just by their presence.....How much more so should that be with God, whom we always have access to? You need joy.....get in His presence!

3. Safety in His presence

Psalm 91:1 (NKJV)

91 He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

Life is full of uncertainty....even many of the things we are certain of are subject to change. Some of that is scary, some of it makes you feel vulnerable, but there is safety in the presence of Jesus!

4. Our hope and victory is to be in His presence

1 Thessalonians 2:19 (AMP)

19 For who is [the object of] our hope or joy or our victor's wreath of triumphant celebration [when we stand] in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you?

This is where it's at church! The enemy has one goal....to keep you from the Lord's presence....eternally....

Sin keeps us from His presence. We see that with Adam and Eve when they first sinned...

Genesis 3:8 (NKJV)

8 And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

What did they do? Hid from His presence....guilt and shame from sin will cause you to try and hide from God's presence.

We see it with Cain after he sins by killing Abel....

Genesis 4:16 (NKJV)

16 Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden.

Again....guilt and shame from sin will cause you to try and hide from God's presence.

I've heard many say how God is holy and can't be in the presence of sin....but that's just not true. Read the book of Job, satan is in God's presence conversing with God.

Yes, God is holy, separate from sin. He doesn't approve of sin, tolerate sin, or participate in sin. When Jesus said I will be with you always, He didn't say "except for when you sin"

To be clear, God does not cohabitate with sin. Either a person is saved and the Spirit of God dwells in them, or they are not saved and the Spirit of God does NOT dwell in them. There is no place for fence riders. You must choose and if you have to ask yourself, if you are unsure which side you are on, then there is probably still a choice to be made. Make it today!

Acts 3:19 (NKJV)

19 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord,

Sin separates people from God, that's true. But do you see what it says here in Acts? Repent therefore and be converted. It's talking of an unsaved person turning to Jesus, the prodigal child coming home.

When that happens there is a refreshing that takes place because you who were separated from God are now in His presence! And once you truly are (real genuine change, true salvation), He will not depart from you!

Psalms 139:7 (NKJV)

7 Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?

The answer is.....You can't! And if you love Jesus, why would you want to? I want to be like Moses!

Exodus 33:12-14 (NKJV)

12 Then Moses said to the Lord, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people.' But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.' 13 Now therefore, I pray, if I have

found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people.”

14 And He said, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

That's what I want.....more than His gifts....I want His presence....Lord I don't need anything or anybody else.....YOU go with me!

I don't know about you but I need forgiveness....daily! I need joy....daily! I need safety....daily!

And I need that hope of a victorious life....in the presence of my God, Jesus Christ! That is what I'm living for! How about you?

This Christmas season, let's remember that we need His presence WAY more than we need His presents! And you know what.....so does every other single person in the world!