

Sunday Sermon: December 30, 2018

The Sermon Text: Ephesians 2: 8,9

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

The Sermon Theme: The Greatest Gift Gives the Greatest Gifts

Have you ever heard of a White Elephant Gift? The white Elephant Gift is a gift that no one really wants. It's really an unnecessary gift that isn't good for anything that gets passed around from one person to another, year after year. It's given at office parties and family gatherings. It is a joke gift that when opened, comes with groans and laughs because it is so ugly or gaudy or strange that no one really wants it.

One of the traditions at my family gatherings was that the White Elephant gift had to be displayed in a prominent place in the house. It couldn't just be put in a closet until next year. You can imagine over the year, the types of comments and conversations that were had about why this strange thing was hanging in the house.

A white elephant gift is not a good gift to get. In fact, the very first White Elephant gift was a terrible gift to get. The King of Siam would give white elephants to those he did not like. Because the elephant was white, it was sacred, it could not be killed, it could not be used for work. Because it was a gift from the king, it could not be given away. In short, when the White Elephant was given, it would usually mean financial ruin for the person or family it was given to. The only thing the elephant would do was to eat the food on the person's land, destroy fields, and take up valuable resources. It was a drain on the person until there was nothing left.

What kinds of gifts did you get this Christmas? Did you get the things you wanted? Did you get something unexpected? Did you appreciate what you got? Did you get White Elephant gifts?

No matter what gifts you received, God continues to give you a gift. The gift that God gives is the greatest gift because God's gift continues to give good gifts every day of your life.

On Christmas day, we talked about how Christmas can be described the holiday of lights. The other thing that describes Christmas really well is gifts. There is no other holiday where we go out of our way to buy gifts for our loved ones like we do at Christmas.

Gifts are very much a part of Christmas. Many enjoy the search, going out and finding just the right gift for someone they love. Others enjoy the wrapping. They spend a lot of time making sure that the gift is wrapped in just the right way. Others enjoy the getting and unwrapping. Which of us can't remember at least one gift that we were really excited about, that we ripped the paper off or the box open to see what was inside?

Gifts are supposed to make us happy, the problem is that we are often left disappointed by gifts at Christmas. The gift is not received with the joy and happiness even though we spent so much time looking for it. The wrapping paper is ripped off and thrown away without even a moment to notice, the card is not read, it only checked for money, the box is opened and it's really not what we want.

When we look at Christmas as special family time, music, lights, or gifts, we will always be disappointed. The family will leave, or worse will not get along, the music will go away, the lights will be taken down, and, a week after Christmas, no one is giving gifts anymore.

These signs of Christmas can be very good as long as they remind us about the truth of Christmas. All the family time, lights, music, and gifts should point us to the celebration of our greatest gift, our Savior Jesus.

Throughout the Old Testament, it might have seemed as if God was promising a White Elephant gift when he gave the promises of the Messiah. It seemed like the people were hoping and praying for nothing. The Messiah did not come. Still, God continued to make the promise that the Savior would be born.

Then, without a family gathering, without special music, or lights, without the world giving him gifts, God gave a gift to every sinful person who has ever lived. In the stable, a humble mother gave birth. Together with her husband, they made do with what they had. They wrapped this gift in clothes and laid him in a manger.

We celebrate at Christmas because God has sent us the greatest gift of a Savior on a mission to save us.

We don't often think of Jesus and Christmas with military terms, but it fits. Jesus was deployed by God with a mission. A soldier doesn't go out on missions by himself. He has the parameters from his superiors. He knows where he is going and what he is trying to accomplish. God sent Jesus with a specific mission. Jesus

came to earth to live perfectly and fulfill the Law for us and to take the punishment for our sins on himself. This was Jesus mission and he fulfilled that mission perfectly.

By his victory, Jesus won some amazing things. He won faith, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Jesus can also do what he wants with the things he won in his victory. He freely and fully gives us these gifts today and every day

These are great gifts of joy and comfort and peace for the believer. However, even though we have a great gift in Jesus, who gives us these great gifts, we are often distracted by the gifts that the world offers. What are some of those gifts that the world tries to offer us to distract us from the great gifts of Jesus?

1. The world offers a gift of heaven that is separate from a religion, a god, a savior or those ugly sins. It says that as long as we are good enough, we must be able to go to a good place.

2. The world offers the gifts money and power as a reward for hard work. Like a carrot being held out in front of a horse, the world tries to make money and power the most important things to us so that we greedily chase after them without caring about anyone or anything else.

3. The world offers us distractions from life as a gift from the things that that we should be spent time on. The world wants to make fun the most important part of our life, and sinful fun even more. Things like sex, drugs and alcohol so that we never think about our sins and our eternal salvation.

4. The world offers us an opportunity to turn anything and everything into an idol. The world wants us to take the gifts like social media, family, food, friends, clothes, or possessions and turn them into the most important things in our life so that we find our sense of purpose in them.

The world offers us White Elephant gifts that can't and won't last. These gifts may look good on the outside, as most temptations initially do, but in the end, they can destroy our lives without us even knowing that is happening. They can lead us on a road that can lead to death and hell.

Are these the gifts that we really want in our lives? Are these the gifts that we chase after for a lifetime, Do these gifts really bring meaning to our lives, or is there more? Is there a gift that is truly free, that is given to us and remains ours forever?

Paul writes in Ephesians 2. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.**

Paul tells us that God has sent a free gift in Jesus. God did not send Jesus because we deserved a Savior. He did not send Jesus because we earned a Savior. The apostle John writes in his first letter, **“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”** These are Christmas passages that talk about a Christmas gift. God's grace and mercy covered us in love and because of that love, he sent his Son to save us.

Paul tells us that the gift of forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus gives is truly free. Jesus doesn't demand anything in return like the world does. The world demands effort, time, money, but then they don't carry through on the promise. The gifts that Jesus gives to us to do fade away over time, they do not run out because the batteries die, they do not break, they do not need to be renewed. The Apostle Peter writes **For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.**

The great gifts of forgiveness and eternal life are ours, not by what we do, but by what Jesus has already done for us. His work is completed, the gifts are ours through the faith that he even works in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

No matter what gifts you received this year, I hope you were not disappointed. God has given you a gift that lasts. Your gift, Jesus, continues to give you gifts every day that last. He walks with you through this world making sure you have what you need. He builds you up in faith as you hear the Word of God, he forgives your sins and gives you peace of mind and of heart, he raises your eyes to heaven to see the wonderful eternity that is yours. The best news is that this gift is truly free and it is truly yours through Jesus.