

“WHAT DID YOU GET FOR CHRISTMAS?”

Colossians 3:12-17

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What did you get for Christmas? Did you get what you wanted? Did it fit? Did you get two of the same thing? Were you one of those people who were part of the day-after-Christmas stampede to exchange what you got for what you really wanted or for sizes that fit?

Whether or not you got a lot of things for Christmas, or nothing at all, today's Lectionary reading talks about seven gifts that God wants to share with each of us. Whether or not Santa Claus was good to you, according to Paul, each of us should have found seven gifts under the tree on Christmas morning: **compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love**. Unlike the sweaters and ties and gadgets that you may have opened over the holidays and found problematic, these seven gifts are just your size! You won't have to take them back to the store and exchange them. In fact, Paul exhorts us to try on the Christian life and see how it fits. You'll find that it's a good fit, and the people with whom you live and work will benefit from your use of these gifts as well.

How do we make the Christian lifestyle our own? What difference does Christmas make? That's the question facing you and me this morning as we look toward a new year, which is itself the gift of God. Many people acknowledge that there was a man named Jesus who walked this earth and said some rather profound things. But they don't understand that he can be a living presence with us today. Charles Colson was a leading figure in the Nixon administration, who was jailed for his actions, then converted to Christianity and founded a prison ministry that has changed the lives of thousands. In his book, *Born Again*, Colson says that he had the most difficult time understanding how a person could believe in Christ. He said he believed that there once was a man named Jesus. But to believe in his presence with us in our daily lives — that was something new. It is the idea of believing in a Christ who is real in our lives today that is at the heart of the Christmas message. God is ready to give each of us the gift of himself. It is up to us to receive that gift and learn what accepting that gift means for our daily lives.

Every time we receive a gift, there are implications; there are consequences. That's why our lawmakers often get into trouble: because they are given gifts, and too often they are expected to slant their decision in favor of those who gave the gifts. In the case of God's gift of Jesus, God does not put conditions on those who receive him. He does not limit or restrict his love in any way. The gift he gives is so wonderful that we just naturally want to give him thanks and praise.

Gift and gratitude belong together. How can we receive a gift and not be thankful? I am frequently upset by those who write to Miss Manners saying that they have just gotten married or had a baby shower and received so many gifts. Is it necessary to send thank yous to all those people — especially with the high cost of postage? I am distressed that anyone would think it is not necessary to say “thank you.” One of the cruelest things in the world is to take someone or something for granted. How can we exist from day to day without being thankful? Even the most sickly person, the most poverty-stricken person, the person who is the victim of tragedy — still is dependent upon so many people that it behooves each of us to live with a deep sense of gratitude in our hearts.

Besides showing our gratitude for the gifts we have received by saying “thank you,” we also show our appreciation for gifts by using them. If someone buys me a sweater, and I never take it out of the box and put it on, the person may get the idea I don’t really like the sweater. If you never use your gifts, it looks as if you are not grateful, not really appreciative. The best way to show your gratitude for gifts is to put them to their intended use.

Just as we show our appreciation to other people when we get a new article of clothing by putting it on and wearing it, so Paul says, the only way we can show our gratitude and appreciation to God is through the lives that we live. The consequence of Christmas, the consequence of receiving the gift of new life that God offers each of us, is for us to put on a new lifestyle. In Paul’s day, when a person became a Christian, he or she literally took off his old clothes, went down into the water and was baptized. When he or she came up out of the water, a new white robe was given to the convert to put on, symbolizing the new life that we are called to live as Christian disciples. If we are serious about our faith, we cannot receive our Christmas gift of Jesus’ birth within our hearts and then go on with our regular routine. Instead, we must let the gift of Christmas reshape our whole pattern of living. As we look toward a new year, God is calling us to clothe ourselves with **compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love** — the new clothes of the kingdom of God. A great new year’s resolution for all of us is to put on the robe Christ has given us, to resolve to be a Christian in thought, word and deed; in short, to practice what we preach.

Notice that all seven qualities of the Christian life which Paul enumerates are concerned with interpersonal relations — relationships between men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, bosses and employees, and among Christian friends. There is no mention of the virtues of efficiency, cleverness, diligence or industry. Not that these virtues are unimportant. But the basic Christian virtues are those which govern and set the tone for human relationships. Christianity is life in community. Our lives are meant to be lived and shared with other people.

If we are going to live the new life that God gives us to unwrap like a gift on Christmas morning, we are going to need compassion. Compassion means more than just feeling sorry for somebody. It is to be so moved by their plight that we are willing to put aside our own concerns to work for the well-being of others. . The Christmas spirit is a generosity that motivates us to give of our excess to someone less fortunate than we are mostly to relieve our own guilt. The Christian spirit is a year-around concern for all God’s children, whether rich or poor, young or old.

Last Sunday Tim Persons told us about the need in the town of Don Don, Haiti, for a new roof for the Methodist school, and about the Mini-Music Marathon that the church is having on

January 10 to raise money for that roof. After worship, two families spoke with Tim and told him of their willingness to match, dollar for dollar, up to \$ 3,000 each, the money that is raised by the Mini-Music Marathon. Last Sunday we announced that Judith Higbee was taking the names of people who want to sing for the Marathon. Our goal is 30 persons or groups. By Monday afternoon, Judith already had 18! Do you think we will be able to raise the \$8,000 needed for the roof? I think we will, for many are taking this quality of compassion seriously.

Hand in hand with compassion goes kindness, which is a spirit of tenderness and gentleness. We must never be condescending or calculating, but exhibit kindness in all our dealings with other people.

Then Paul says to put on humility. To be humble is not to allow ourselves to be used as a doormat. It is the simple acknowledgment that God is the Creator and that we are his creatures. Humility means recognizing who we are in light of who God is.

Paul also tells us to put on meekness or gentleness. Aristotle once described gentleness as the happy mean between too little and too much anger. Anger is the normal reaction to so much of what happens in our lives. Anger is not sin, but anger may lead to sin if we do not deal with it constructively. In other places in his letters Paul talks about self-control. We need to channel our anger constructively to bring about the changes Christ wants to see in our world. Let each of us pray for the inner strength to handle our anger appropriately.

Then Paul says to put on patience. That's a tough one for most of us. An elderly woman in my first church said, "Don't pray for patience!" "Why not?" I asked without thinking. "Well," she said, "You know how you get patience!" Patience means never giving up on any of God's children. Our model for patience is Almighty God, who sees all our sins and shortcomings and never gives up on us.

Do you open your biggest gift first or save it for last? In his Christmas list, Paul saves the two most important gifts for last: forgiveness and love. When surveying world religions, a noted Harvard scholar concluded that the distinctive emphasis and contribution of Christianity to world religions was the quality of forgiveness. A forgiving spirit pervades the teachings of our faith. We follow one who from the cross cried as he was dying, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" This from a man who instructed his followers to forgive people, not the proverbial seven times, but "*seventy-seven times.*"(Matt.18:22) In other words, keep on forgiving people until you lose count. We cannot live very long with other people without a forgiving spirit. Otherwise we get weighted down under a load of grudges and past insults and old wounds. Christ teaches us that just as God has forgiven us, so we must forgive those who have wronged us.

Finally, as the climax of Paul's list of gifts, the centerpiece of his teaching, Paul says, "*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*" (Col. 3:14) Sooner or later every group of people will have its arguments, its disagreements, its differences of opinion. Only love will hold us together in an unbreakable fellowship. One of the commentators calls love the "SuperGlue" that holds the church together.(1) That pretty much says it all.

My friends, if there could be one thing that this church is noted for, I would want it to be love. Not the church with the intricate stained glass windows, nor the church that has the beautiful new Great Hall. Not the church that has three bell choirs, nor the church that has 79 kids signed up to play Upward Basketball. Not even the church where the Alcoholics

Anonymous meets, nor the church that built a Habitat House, but the church where there is so much love that we are bound together in spite of our various personalities and differences of opinion. That is God's goal for this church and for every church: to be a **community of love**.

In the comic strip, *Dagwood and Blondie*, there was the time Dagwood got up one Saturday morning and said, "I'm a new person! Starting right now, I have a whole new outlook on life!" So he went out and raked leaves with a smile on his face, and whistled as he washed his car and did a host of chores from the "job jar" Blondie had prepared. After a while, he caught the attention of his neighbor, Herb, who was doing his chores, but with a long face. Dagwood says, "I'm a new person!" Herb grumbles, "You look like the same old Dagwood Bumstead to me." To which Dagwood replies, "I can see it's going to be awfully hard for the new me to live next door to the old you!"

And that's the challenge for all of us: to live a new life in the midst of an old world, where selfishness is still more prevalent than generosity, where holding a grudge is more commonplace than offering forgiveness, and where self-interest is more popular than self-giving love. But that's exactly what God is calling us to do as we begin a new year and a new adventure of faith: to live a new life in the midst of an old world.

To help us live that new life, God has seven Christmas gifts for us. God has seven gifts that will change our lives. These seven gifts can change the world. I'm afraid some of them are still under the tree! I'm afraid some of them are still in the box! Some of them have not been opened yet! **What did you get for Christmas?** There's **compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love**. They are yours for the taking, and they're just your size. Try them on and you'll see! Put on the new lifestyle. Resolve to live this new year as God intends. Most important, clothe yourself with **love**, the SuperGlue that holds us together and enables us to live in harmony with one another.

Yes, God has given us all we need to live an abundant life in the coming year. May these Christmas gifts help us to live a new life for God.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for the gifts you have given to us. May they enable us to live a new life as we begin a new year, the life that you intend. Amen.

Note:

1. Lincoln, Andrew T. The Letter to the Colossians. The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume XI. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000., p. 650.