

Joy of Gifts • Matthew 2:11

My mother was born and grew up in England where the Christmas tradition is to open presents on Christmas morning. Even though I have a Swedish last name, my mother's English Christmas tradition prevailed in my family. In fact, it is still our own family tradition today. So, every December 25th of my life has begun with everyone gathered to exchange gifts.

While the date of gift giving has not changed, my perspective has. As I reflect back on my childhood I can only remember the presents I received. I don't recall one gift I ever gave to any member of my family. Now it is almost the opposite. As an adult, I can barely remember any of the gifts I've received. What I most remember are the gifts I have given.

The change didn't take place all at once. It took time. But there is one Christmas when the transformation seemed to permanently take hold. It was my first Christmas as a father. As never before, I didn't care what I got because I was so totally wrapped up in what I gave. We had a four-month-old daughter and I wanted to give her everything in the world.

Changing from a getter to a giver is one of the most wonderful changes that can happen in a person's life. Only when it happens do you begin to truly understand the words of Jesus in Acts 20:35, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" The wonderful joy of gifts is that giving them means more than receiving them. To better understand, we return to the story of the first recorded Christmas gift-givers in Matthew 2:1-13:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judah, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was

disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judah," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star that they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down

and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

The first four words of this story may be the most neglected even though they are among the most important: "*After Jesus was born*"

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Jesus came first. He was the Number One gift. This fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah 9:6 predicting the coming of the Messiah: “. . . to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Those words are beautiful poetry, but also profound theology. The Son of God is eternal. He had no beginning; he always existed. He was given by God the Father and sent to earth to become human. It is called the “incarnation” or “into flesh”. When he was conceived and born, the Son of God became human and was given a human name, Jesus.

So the terminology is very specific: “. . . to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” Without the gift of the Son of God there would be no Christmas, no Magi, no salvation, no joy, no reason to celebrate or to give. All of which makes a most important point—to experience the joy of Christmas first requires the receiving of the gift of Jesus. Otherwise, Christmas is no more than a commercial holiday one week before the end of each year.

If you have not received God’s Christmas gift, now is the time. This is the place. God’s offer still stands. Receive Jesus Christ as God’s personal gift to you. Trust him as your Savior from sin. Accept him as the Leader of your life. Don’t wait. Pray right this minute, telling God, “Yes, I accept Jesus as my Christ, my Lord. Right now. Right here. Thank you, God, for the Number One gift!” because only those who have received can ever truly know the joy of giving!

The rest of the Magi story is really an “after-Christmas Christmas story”. Unlike the cards we receive showing wise men on camels or standing by the manger, the Bible indicates the Magi didn’t arrive until long after that first Christmas. Matthew 2:11 says, “. . . on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.” Jesus wasn’t living in a stable; he was living in a house. No manger is mentioned. He was a young child, maybe almost two years old, because when King Herod felt threatened by the risk that this child might somehow seize his throne, he ordered the execution of all male babies in the entire area who

were age two and under. Every indication is that the Wise Men started their journey on the day of Jesus’ birth and it took them up to twenty-four months to arrive.

We call them “Wise Men” although the technical name is Magi. They were astrologers, magicians, pagan priests from Persia to the east. They were men who had devoted their lives to studying the stars and were convinced that they could predict a person’s future. In today’s culture they would be the authors of the daily horoscopes in newspapers around the world.

Somehow, in their study of the stars, they saw something unusual and interpreted it as historic and beckoning. They probably were caught up in the worldwide expectation of a coming leader who would rule the world. They decided to follow the star in search of a king.

I find an amazing insight into God’s attitude toward true seekers. God doesn’t require a person to have all the right knowledge and beliefs to come to him. Those who seek the truth, who honestly desire God, will be led to Jesus. Their route may be strange but the destination is what counts.

When the Magi finally arrived at the house of Joseph, Mary and Jesus they immediately bowed down and worshiped Jesus. That is nothing short of amazing. Remember, that was written by a Jew. Matthew knew well the teaching of the Hebrew law in Exodus 34:14, “*Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*” Every Jew knew the rules inside and out: no idols; no images; nothing that even appears to be worship of anyone or anything other than the one true God of heaven and earth. Yet, Matthew approvingly writes that these Magi worshiped a boy named Jesus who was less than two years old.

There is only one conclusion: Jesus must be God! Non-Christian religions and most cults balk at the notion that Jesus is truly and fully God, but there is no doubt what the Bible teaches, what those Magi thought or what Matthew believed. Jesus is God in human form!

The Magi worshiped Jesus as God and gave gifts to Jesus as a king, gifts they had carried on a very long journey. All of them were very expensive and the type of gift given to royalty. The sym-

bolism and significance is not explained, but we can't help but wonder.

Of all the gifts that were given, the most royal of the three was gold. Gold was worth a lot then and it is worth a lot today. It is the king of precious metals. This may have been the first and last time in the family of Joseph and Mary that they ever had gold of their own.

Incense was what a priest used. It was required to burn incense throughout the day at the temple in Jerusalem. It was called a sweet fragrance to God. Incense always reminded Jewish people of the connection between God and man. It, too, was a fitting gift because Jesus was and is the only true mediator between God and us.

The strangest gift of the three was myrrh. Also expensive and also a spice, myrrh was a resin used for embalming. It was externally applied to the body prior to burial. What an unusual gift for a baby . . . unless that baby was born to die! In this first Christmas gift the death of Jesus on the cross was not too subtly hinted at. Jesus had come to atone for human sin.

Suddenly the holy family was rich. The Magi gave their expensive gifts and left. But, whatever happened to the money? What was done with the gifts?

While not directly told, the story immediately reports their flight into Egypt where Joseph, Mary and Jesus became refugees hiding out in Africa. How did they live? Where did they stay? What did they eat? How did they survive for the next couple of years until it was safe to return home to Nazareth?

The obvious answer is that they financed the family trip and supported themselves with the gifts of the Magi. What was given as an act of worship was used in most practical ways to keep Jesus safe and alive. It is often that way . . . that gifts to God are wonderfully used to accomplish God's greater purposes on earth.

What do we learn from this after-Christmas Christmas story? We learn a lot about Christian giving from Magi who were not even Christians. For even though Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to*

give than to receive," the truth is that the bedrock of everything Christian is getting before giving! The Magi first met Jesus and then gave to Jesus. The order could not and cannot be reversed. No one can be a Christian without first getting. No Christian can give away anything without first receiving from God. All of Christianity is based on God as the first and greatest giver. God gave his one and only Son who left heaven, became human, sacrificed his life and loved us all the way. God offers us Jesus. There is no greater or better gift.

Anything that a Christian gives flows out of God's generosity to us. Whether it is giving worship or money to God, helping the poor with our time and money, opening our homes in hospitality or any other giving of love or possessions . . . we must first receive.

It is out of order to first ask people to give anything. First things first! Always ask people to receive from God. Those who fully receive Christ's salvation and blessing will be motivated to give; those who have not received Jesus and his blessings need not even try to give. Always, always, always receive from God first. Take him at his word. Accept his salvation. Receive his love. Get his good news. Receive, receive and receive some more from God because God is an outrageously generous giver.

The second principle of giving after getting is to give out of what we have received. As God has loved us, so we love others. As God has forgiven us, so we forgive others. As God has blessed us, so we bless others. As God has treated us kindly, so we treat others kindly. Whether we are giving

a present at Christmas, an offering at church or an act of kindness for a stranger we always give because we have received. We are God's agents. We should let him fill our cup and then let our cup overflow to others to make room for more blessings from God to give away.

When I hear about people with critical spirits, who treat others harshly and are stingy instead of generous, I feel sorry for them. I assume that

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they have never received from God or that they are somehow trying to hoard God's love and generosity for fear God might run out and they will get no more.

The bottom line is that giving is good. Giving is Christian. Giving is a blessing. Not just Christmas gift giving or church giving but all giving that is in the name and truth of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to be a giver.

I've thought long and hard about this statement from Jesus: "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" It is interesting that St. Paul quotes the statement as if it had been spoken by Jesus, yet there is no place in the biographies of Jesus where it is ever mentioned. My guess is that everyone knew what Jesus said so there seemed to be no need to write it in his biography.

If we were using more common terminology today we would say, "It is happier to give than to receive." But that's based on a presupposition that we have first experienced the joy and the happiness of receiving from God and then we move on to give.

But, why is it happier to give than to receive? The answers are multiple. First of all, only a Christian will ever understand this truth. You have to first be a disciple of Jesus or you will never get what he means.

It is happier to give than to receive because givers are like God. And what can be happier than to be God-like? Every time we generously give and bless others we are behaving like God and that is what makes a Christian truly happy.

It is happier to give than to receive because we have received so much. Christians are keenly aware that "*every good and perfect gift comes from above*" (from God). That's what motivates us. That's what makes us happy. When we realize that we have received so much we want to be generous; we want to give it away.

It is happier to give than to receive because of the wonderful satisfaction that comes in blessing others. Frankly, it feels good! It feels good to give away. It feels good to help others. It feels good to worship God with something that costs us something. It feels good to be generous. It feels good to sacrifice. It feels good to make a difference in the name of Jesus.

Imagine you are about to take a Christmas journey to a far away place called the year to come. There you will meet a poor family with a young child; you will see people threatened by powerful and ruthless leaders; you will encounter 10,000 different needs. You are not sure you want to go. There is so much uncertainty. There are so many risks. But you feel compelled. You feel drawn. It is like following a bright star that God himself has set into your sky.

Before leaving on this journey you must pack up whatever you will need and whatever you will give away. What will you pack? What will you take? What will you give?

This Christmas begins a journey into tomorrow. As you embark, I challenge you to go as a giver. Give encouragement to those who are down. Give support to those who are criticized. Give love to those who are hated. Give help to those who are poor. Give the Gospel to those who are spiritually lost. Give time to those that are lonely. Give generously. Give royally. Give sacrificially.

Give . . . because you have received. Give . . . because you are a Christian. Give . . . because it is happier to give than to receive!

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