

The Presents

Luke 3:7-18

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

So have you all finished your Christmas Shopping yet? Don't you just love this time of year, the shopping, the sales, the crowds, and the ads you see everywhere? Thanks to Shellene's diligence we are pretty much done our shopping for this coming Christmas. We checked off the lists the things we got our family and friends. Oh that's another thing I just love this time of year, the lists. I am not sure about your families, but in my family you have to write out lists of what you want for Christmas so that relatives have ideas of what to get you. We got one such list from my oldest Niece, Cary Lynn, who is turning 17 this year. Now keep in mind we have 11 nieces and nephews so we set a small budget to spend on each of them, Her initial list included:

UGG Boots – \$170

Designer Sweatshirt with hood - \$125

New York & Company Pea Coat - \$100

A Tiffany key pendent - \$175

A blackberry pearl - \$130

And a long list of gift cards to exclusive and expensive shops.

Let me tell you, Shellene and I aren't getting her any of that stuff. I did ask if the price for the ugg boots included both pairs of shoes – or was it just one boot for that price? But really she is no different then the other ones, all wanting and wanting big. I know you know what I mean since as I was saying this, many of you were shaking your heads in agreement, you must know kids that have similar lists and wants. After all that is what the market tells us Christmas is all about. How many of us don't hear someone after Christmas ask, "What'd ya get?" Oh yes you may hear the question about how your Christmas was, but usually your hear just as much or even more so is, "What'd ya get?" This isn't just a kid thing either. Adults like to get things too. We cannot help but be excited when we get things. We love to get things. We might try to act calm and cool and collected on the outside as we open our gifts, but deep down, many of us are doing jumping-jacks in our heads, because we just love getting things.

A question that you will never hear asked after Christmas is. "What did you give?" Imagine asking someone that after Christmas. "Wha'da ya give?" I am sure it would catch them completely off guard. Try it out this year and see what happens. Walk up to someone at the store, at work or at school and say, "So, wha'da ya give?" Then wait to see how they respond. Many will just tell you what they got because that is what the human brain is wired to respond to since a young age.

“What’d I get, well let me tell you...” Our ears don’t even hear the small difference of Wha’da you give? Because it is about getting, that’s more about me, what I have – as human beings we are more focused on getting things than we are on giving things.

John came out from the wilderness preaching to people to turn from this “me first” attitude and return to God. He came calling people to repent, to change their attitude towards their way of life and their possessions and their relationship with God. Remember, last week we said that to repent means to turn around, to change direction in your life. John was preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah. The Bible describes how crowds of people would come out to see him. He was the latest craze for the news and gossip throughout the country. He was a little different because he stuck out, a man living in the desert, dressed in camel’s hair eating grasshoppers and wild honey and preaching like a wild prophet of old, telling people to repent.

As the crowds came out to see John, God revealed something to John about these people. Many of them really weren’t all that sincere. They were materialistic people – their god was money, possessions, things, what they got. Many of them weren’t interested in changing their lives and preparing for the Messiah. John was a tourist attraction to them, the latest thing that you just have to drive by and see for yourself. That’s why John calls them a “brood of vipers.” That isn’t a compliment. John warns them to “bear fruits in keeping with repentance.” Don’t just stand there, John told them. If you really are sincere, if you really are repenting in your life, then change, do something that people can see, do something that makes a difference in the world, that helps your neighbor or stranger, do something that does the will of God. Time was running out, John tells the people. “Even now the ax is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

In many ways, we are like those people who came out to see John. We struggle with materialism too – don’t we? The Christmas season can really bring it out of us, more so than the other seasons of the year. Christmas is that time of the year when we focus on “getting things” – “Wha’da ya get? Look at what I got!” our selfishness, our desires, our wants, our sins.

That’s what John the Baptist was addressing many years ago. He pointed out the people’s sins. He was calling them to examine themselves and turn and change. To turn away from the sins and temptations of this world and instead look for the coming Messiah, the one who is more powerful than John, that one that is still coming. He was talking, of course, about Jesus the Christ. Jesus comes into this world as God incarnate, the very presence of God, fully in one man who gives us redemption and so much love that he forgives and washes away our sins. John calls us to give this same gift to others as God has given first given to us, to repent, to turn back to God, to give as God has given, to be changed.

John gave his hearers very practical ways that they could do this, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” John told the people to change their focus from getting, my things, to giving, to caring for others. He tells the tax collectors to “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” John told them to do business fairly, to treat others fairly in all dealings. He tells the soldiers to not “extort money from anyone by threats of by false accusations, and be content with your wages.” Simple little ways of living lives of giving.

Are these people out of the ordinary? No by no means, they are normal, much like us. They might have more than one outfit, I am sure many of you have another coat or sweater or pair of pants at home. People have a cupboard at home of food that you may not even eat today, that you don't need but have there anyway. Tax collectors get money by charging higher prices, they want to make a profit and the higher the better, who doesn't want more and more, everyone does it. The soldiers can use their station and power to get what they want when they want it, that's what everyone wants, the ability to get things now, doesn't matter about consequences or debts we rack up, we all do it. These examples that John is talking about here are just like everyone, everyone does it. But he gives us plain simple ways we can change. They are called on to change their living style from getting and having to giving and sharing.

I am sure someone this year will ask you, “What did you get for Christmas?” But this Christmas, as you begin to answer them try telling them about what you gave instead? Think about a savior who was given to you so our sins are forgiven. Think about that pardon – that forgiveness that is yours in Christ. Think about the sure hope of eternal life. None of these gifts seem very impressive to the markets of our society, but these spiritual gifts that God has given to you are the greatest gifts of them all. So when someone this year asks, “wha'da ya get?”, tell them about your greatest gift that same gift that is given to them also. Share with them and give of yourself, seeking ways to share the joy and promise of God. Look for ways to give this year. Let us be doers and bear fruit worthy of righteousness. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN. Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

Almighty Lord, you grant us hope, joy and celebration in the gift of your Son, Our Lord Jesus the Christ. You call us to repent and turn from our sins to receive your forgiveness and love. Empower us to be filled with your Spirit, to share that blessing with others, given through your Word made flesh. Continue to grow with in us the calling to be your people filled with your everlasting joy.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer..

O Heavenly Father, we ask send your spirit of comfort and hope. To be with your people to lift them out of the pains of this world and the anxieties that plague us. Grant happiness and joy, instead of hatred and war. Grant love and health where there is disease and despair. Grant your spirit to guide your creation into new and various ways always leading us towards your ultimate joy and peace.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer.

God, stretch out your saving hand to those who are sick. With your strong love, comfort the lonely, the oppressed, and all who suffer. Give courage to those facing surgery. Give healing to those who are recovering from surgery. Give peace to those troubled both physically and mentally. Impart your Holy Comforter to be with them in their times of need. Especially we remember today for our hospitalized, our homebound and especially for Howell Crawford, Ashley Storm, Dan Keeney and all those we name now in our prayers to you....

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for this church and your one church throughout the world. Grant us the wisdom to be your true servants, to witness to the joy found in you and to share it with our communities and beyond. Guide your people of faith, deepen our understanding of your Word, call to us in prayer, and direct us in all that we do, so that we may do it towards your Glory, now and forever.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Into your hands, o Lord we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.