

Title: Gifting Like the Magi, pt. 2
Date: 1/5/25
Subject: Gifts we should give to God as “sacrifices”
Scripture: Acts 10:1-4; Ephesians 5:1, 2; Romans 15:15, 16; Hebrews 13:16

As some of you did, we celebrated Christmas with our family not on Christmas Day. It was Sunday and Monday. I got several gifts that keep on giving. First, there is the fruitcake. Jean and I got more pictures from our granddaughters who love sharing their artwork with us. The youngest granddaughter Josie and I got matching T-shirts with a picture of the two of us wearing Snoopy Christmas shirts and the words “best buddies.” Then there's this picture of Josie in a talking frame. ---- Push the button for the message

Today, January 6, is noted as being the 12th day of Christmas. It's celebrated in some circles as Epiphany to celebrate God showing salvation is for Gentiles as well as Jews. This was indicated by the Gentile Magi's inclusion in the birth narratives in the Bible.

This all makes it fitting for Part 2 of Gifting Like the Magi. Our focus is on gifts we can give to God - stressing ones spoken of in the Bible as sacrifices.

Last week we saw that wise guys and wise women, who are known as “a royal and holy priesthood,” give the Lord sacrifices of praise, our entire beings as well as a broken and contrite spirit.

I. Sacrifice of prayer

Read Acts 10:1 - 4.

Cornelius, a Gentile, diligently sought God. An angel appeared to him to convey that God had heard his prayers, remembered his gifts and would provide more insight through a man named Peter. The angel told Cornelius his prayers served as memorial offering before God. They had a fragrant aroma.

We like to walk into a room and be greeted, no, welcomed, no, bowled over by the aroma of Thanksgiving dinner or freshly baked cookies. God likes the aroma of his people talking with him. He likes the way we smell and it's not because we wear Old Spice or Chanel #5.

The book of Revelation describes the prayers of the saints as incense held in golden bowls (Rev 5:8) and are mixed with incense to be offered to God (Rev 8:3, 4). King David had desired that his prayers would come before the Lord like incense (Psalm 141:2).

To say the prayers of God's people smell good to him is speaking of God in anthropomorphic or humanlike terms. It's the only way we can view God. He is so far beyond human comprehension.

King Solomon gives a contrast between what the Lord likes and doesn't: “The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him...The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous” (Proverbs 15:8, 29).

Elijah mocked the priests of Baal for the ineffectiveness of their prayers during the contest on Mount Carmel to see who was the true God (1 Kings 18:26-29). They had danced and called out for Baal to answer

them. Elijah told him to “shout louder! Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” They shouted louder and committed the self-sacrifice of slashing themselves. The frantic and frenetic display was to show their sincerity and arouse Baal to action. It didn't work as there wasn't a god who was listening to their prayers.

Prayer is a sacrifice offered to the Lord, but we can also view prayer as a sacrifice we make because it can be so hard to do. Other times, we pray the same thing again and again and again and it seems to go nowhere. The heavens feel like they're made of brass and no one is listening. Or we want something and it takes too long. But we are to keep praying.

The Lord God of the Bible hears every prayer of joy and thanksgiving for a new life that's entered the world, every anguished cry from an agonizing heart, every song of triumph over sin, every groan and ache in the struggle against sin, every gasp of fear, every... He hears them all and will answer according to what's best.

Charles Spurgeon: “True prayer is neither a mere mental exercise nor a vocal performance. It is far deeper than that – it is spiritual transaction with The Creator of Heaven and Earth.”

II. The sacrifice of love

READ Ephesians 5:1, 2

We're to be imitators of Jesus, our Savior. Inquiring minds want to know: what example did he provide?

On Jesus' last night on earth, he repeatedly spoke about the importance of love. “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:12, 13).

A few hours later Jesus showed the full extent of his love by sacrificing himself on the cross. The love from Jesus wasn't merely words, but showed itself in vivid demonstration.

One day Jesus was being interrogated by the religious leaders (Mark 12:28-34). One group asked him a convoluted question about the resurrection of the dead. This is really interesting since they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus pointed out their error and told them they didn't know the Scriptures or the power of God but were badly mistaken. He told them God is the God of the living not the dead.

A teacher of the law noticed Jesus had given a good answer. He asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus answered, “The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

The man replied that Jesus was right. Duh! What should he have expected from the Son of God? C'mon. We can cut him a little slack as he didn't have all the information we do. The man responded to the truth and light he had. He said the two commands are “more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Those are the words of a human, but the Lord included them in Scripture as a truthful insight.

We're principally concerned at the moment with love we're to show to other people.

Loving others can be a sacrifice. It takes time and effort. We have to be unselfish. There's the thought that other people don't deserve it. They're just so unlovable.

Those traits undeserving and unlovable perfectly describe others...and us. Yet God loved us enough that he gave his one and only Son. Remember what we heard earlier: we're to be imitators of Christ: "Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

An African teenager listened carefully as his teacher spoke about Jesus. "He taught us that giving gifts is an expression of our love and friendship for Him and each other." Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). A couple days later the youth brought the teacher a beautiful seashell. The teacher asked, "Where did you ever find such a beautiful shell?" He told her there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found, a bay on the sea coast. The teacher was speechless. She knew it would have taken the student hours to walk there and back. "You shouldn't have gone all that way to get this gift for me." His eyes brightened, "Long walk part of gift." (Story adapted from Preaching Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 88).

Jesus' long walk from heaven to earth to the cross was part of the gift. Our long walk with others is part of the gift, the sacrifice.

Part of loving others is sharing the Good News of Jesus with them.

READ Romans 15:15, 16

III. Bringing the Lord a sacrifice of souls.

Paul wasn't the only person who was to be involved in presenting people to God as an acceptable offering. It's the commission given to every Christ follower. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

In Chip Ingram's video teaching on heaven we used in Sunday School, he closed with a thought-provoking, sobering and disturbing question: "Do you know anybody, that when you think of the heaven Jesus prepared for you, that you want to be there, but as far as you know, if they died right now, they wouldn't be there? I want you to think of two or three people you care about, and then ask yourself, "Who do you think ought to tell them?". . . This is for real. This is life and death. This is forever and ever and ever....Is there anybody that you're thinking, "I'd sure like them to be in heaven," but you're thinking somebody, somewhere, somehow is going to tell them, but they probably trust you more than anyone else."

Who comes to our minds and what are we going to do about it?

When Jean and I were in Pigeon Forge, TN during our sabbatical, we did a lot of touristy stuff, though we didn't see Dolly Parton. We drove into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where walked the paved trail to Clingmans Dome. It's the highest point in the Park, where on a clear day, you can see seven states. We didn't know the trail was rated at moderate to difficult because of its 13% gradient. We discovered just how hard it was shortly after we started. Then some encouraging person coming down told us the hike was worth

it and we were almost to the top. Liar. We were no where near the top. We thought people in the South were supposed to call you “Hon” and drip with kindness. Must have been a tourist. We eventually made it to the top, didn’t linger very long before coming down. We had more to do – souvenirs to buy, places to eat, ice cream to lick and shopping, at least window shopping.

One store was a toy store -- gifts for the grandkids. The store was playing Christian music. I told the man behind the counter I appreciated his choice in music. He proceeded to share his testimony of how he came to know Jesus Christ as his Savior. He had it on his computer, just in case he forgot some details. He introduced himself as Keith Dice. He got saved when he was 33. He’d been a heavy cocaine user and seller and ran in the same crowd as Phil Robertson of Duck Dynasty who also got saved. Somehow, he wound up at a church pastored by Charles Stanley. Stanley approached Dice after a service and asked if he knew Christ as Savior. Dice said he didn't. Stanley proceeded to lead Dice to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Dice’s life was turned around and he’s been telling people about Jesus ever since.

Dice exemplifies what the Scripture commands: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have...do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). Last week we heard: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Being involved in bringing a sacrifice of souls can be a sacrifice because we may need to get out of our comfort zone. It may require us to get past our fear of what people might think of us.

Last Sunday we were in the neighborhood of our next call to sacrifice when we were challenged: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name” (Hebrews 13:15).

READ Hebrews 13:16

IV. Sacrifice of doing good and sharing with others

Some might think this is a replay of the sacrifice of love. It's fine if you want to take it that way as an added reminder of how we're to interact with people. We all need reminders.

Here are a couple the Bible gives: “for we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Eph 2:10), “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24, 25). We’re to do good and share with others and help others to show love and good deeds, including encouraging them to regularly be with the rest of the God's family. We're all in this together. It's the approach of “Help me help you help me help you” on to infinity, better, on to eternity.

We’re to do good because God has done so much good for us. We’re to share because God has shared his best with us. God has been extremely generous with us. He didn't send a fellow human to be the sacrifice for sins, not even Moses or Elijah. He didn't send one of the angels, who are in a higher class of being than people, but are still definitely lower than God. The triune God sent the Son of God.

The amazement at what God did led Paul to exclaim: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9:15). The praise to God came as the conclusion of his praise for the Macedonian church who “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (2 Cor 8:2-4). Paul wanted to see the Corinthian churches “excel in this grace of giving” (2 Cor 8:7) then called them to remember: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). He spoke of their eager willingness to help and enthusiasm (2 Cor 8:11; 9:2). He instructs: “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (2 Cor 9:8).

Paul declares people will give thanks to God because of their generosity and others’ hearts will go out to them “because of the surpassing grace God has given you” (2 Cor 9:11-14).

Contrast the Macedonian church attitude with that of Eli Black. Tom McCann, former executive with the company which Black headed, described a business lunch the two had (In An American Company). When the waitress brought a plate of cheese and crackers as an appetizer, Black grabbed them, placed them in front of him, and blocked them with his arms. McCann hadn't eaten for hours and hinted he'd like some. Black acted as though he hadn't heard and went on with the meeting. After a while, Black placed a cracker and cheese on the tips of his fingers and continued to talk before finally placing the cracker on the McCann's plate and blocking the rest as before. It was clear Black was in charge, manipulating and controlling as he pleased. Greedy. Selfish.

We're to be generous. Generosity includes time, talents, possessions, and finances. Our attitude toward all of these things is to be as managers and stewards of what's been entrusted into our temporary possession.

I give thanks to God for your generosity with finances. The governing board constantly gives thanks for your generosity. Thanks also for your generosity with time, talents, energy and serving which is moved by your hearts of love for God and others – for your sacrifices in these areas.

We saw earlier how Cornelius' gifts to the poor went up as a memorial offering before God (Acts 10:4). Paul told the Philippian church he was grateful for the gifts they sent, which were a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18).

Doing good and sharing with others can be a sacrifice because the natural tendency is to accumulate for our comfort. It's the idea of “what's mine is mine and what's yours is mine.” It can be a sacrifice because we don't always want to do good. . . especially to those we don't think deserve it. We'd rather seek vengeance instead of putting a helpful basket of coals on their head to warm them. But we do what is right.

End with this promise from Scripture: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:9, 10).