

## **AN INDESCRIBABLE GIFT**

**JOHN 3:16**

Dwight Moody was the Billy Graham (or maybe the Rick Warren) of the late 1800s. He'd been to England in the early days of his ministry and there he'd met a young English preacher named Henry Moorhouse. One day Moorhouse said to Moody, "I'm thinking of going to America." "Well, if you should ever get to Chicago, come down to my church and I will give you a chance to preach," said Moody. Sometime later, after Moody had returned home, he received a telegram that said, "Have just arrived in New York. Will be in Chicago on Sunday. Moorhouse." Moody was perplexed about what he should do. Frankly, he was just being polite when he invited Moorhouse to preach at his church. He'd never actually heard Henry Moorhouse speak and he, Moody, was just about to leave for a series of special meetings elsewhere. Finally, he said to the leaders of his church, "I think I should let him preach once. So let him preach once; then if the people enjoy him, put him on again."

Moody was gone for a week. When he got back, he said to his wife, "How did that young preacher do?" "Oh, he's a better preacher than you are," his wife said. "He's telling sinners that God loves them." "That isn't right," said Moody. "God doesn't love sinners." (Apparently, this was before God used Dwight Moody so powerfully to preach that very message to many sinners who received Jesus as their Savior). "Well," said Mrs. Moody, "you go and hear him." "What?" said Moody, "Do you mean to tell me that he's still preaching?" "Yes, he has been preaching all week, and he has only had one verse for a text. It's John 3:16." Moody hurried off to the meeting. Henry Moorhouse got up and began his message by saying, "I've been hunting for a text all week and I haven't been able to find a better text than John 3:16. So I think we will just talk about it once more." And so he did. Afterwards, Dwight Moody said it was on that night that he first clearly understood the good news of God's great love in Jesus Christ.

John 3:16. Would you read or recite it with me just now? "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (NIV) I suggest that John 3:16 could be called "The Christmas Verse." Last week we considered the first phrase of that verse – "For God so loved the world..." – and reflected on God's measureless love. God's love is as big as God Himself, as wide as the world itself and as little as you yourself. Today, I want to reflect with you on the next phrase in John 3:16 – "... that he gave his one and only Son..." God's measureless love is expressed in and through an indescribable gift: His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

How do you shop for Christmas gifts? I wonder if you're one of those disgusting creatures who has purchased every gift on sale by Labor Day. On the other hand, I've met a few people who wait and do all their shopping on Christmas Eve! Most of us fall between those two extremes, don't we? Most of us like to give and receive meaningful gifts. What makes a gift meaningful? What kind of a gift is meaningful both to give as well as to receive? Well, I suggest that a meaningful gift is, first of all:

### **A PLANNED GIFT.**

A well-planned gift is thoughtfully given after much deliberation and reflection. That makes it is a meaningful gift. How many of the gifts that you will give or receive this Christmas will be well-planned? How much time will you spend shopping, hunting and wrapping? How much thought do you give to getting just the right gift for the special people in your life? Both of my parents are with the Lord now, but I admit I used to hate to shop for Christmas gifts for them when they were with us. They were absolutely impossible to shop for! They already had everything they wanted and they didn't need anything. But one year I got excited about the gift I got for my dad. He was Australian by birth and loved the sport of cricket. When Cheryl and I got married, we honeymooned on the island of Barbados. Cricket happens to be the national sport of Barbados. All week long I hunted for a special cricket souvenir or memento. I finally settled on a subscription to a monthly magazine on worldwide cricket. My dad loved that gift and I enjoyed giving it to him! It was special because it was a planned gift.

A well-planned gift can bring as much joy to the giver as it does to the recipient. Maybe it's the delight in seeing that look of surprise, that squeal of joy or those tears of appreciation welling up in the eyes of a loved one. I suggest that expressing love can be a well-planned gift. Of course, expressions of love can be spontaneous or spur of the moment. But love – the deepest love – involves acts of some kind that are expressed thoughtfully, with care and with advance planning.

The truth is that God was planning how to love you long before the universe was ever created. His love found expression in His Son, Jesus. Jesus is the planned gift of God to this world generally and to you specifically. The Bible makes it clear that before there was anything except God Himself, before the universe was formed and before the dawn of creation on this planet, God already knew that Jesus was to be His greatest gift. God already planned and intended to send His Son. The Bible says, "Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure." (Ephesians 1:4-5 NLT)

Don't ever think that the entry of evil into the world and the fall of human beings into sin somehow caught God off guard. God didn't have to scramble around suddenly and seek a solution to a problem He hadn't anticipated. God knew all from the beginning. Even before the first star was created, before the first galaxy was flung out into space, before the Holy Spirit hovered over this planet to create all that we now see and touch, God the Father knew that God the Son would take on human flesh in the person of one Jesus of Nazareth. He already knew that Jesus would die for our sins and be raised to life again. Jesus is the planned gift of God Himself for your salvation and mine. A meaningful gift is a planned gift. Secondly, a meaningful gift is:

### **A PRIME GIFT.**

You can give a gift that is planned, but that doesn't mean it represents the best you could give. It's planned but it's not prime. But a truly meaningful gift is both planned

and prime. Hallmark cards used to have an advertising slogan that said when you bought and sent a Hallmark card, “you cared enough to send the very best.” God did that when He sent Jesus into this world. Jesus was God’s well-planned gift to you, but He is also the Father’s prime gift – the very best He could ever give.

The most convincing evidence that God really loves you is the gift of His Son. God has indeed created a beautiful world to live in, but a gorgeous sunset, majestic mountain range or peaceful ocean view doesn’t prove God loves you. And, yes, the Bible teaches that God created you, but even that doesn’t prove God loves you. Lots of human fathers don’t love their biological children even though they helped to create them. But when God the Father sent His Son into the world, it provided undeniable proof of His love. He sent the One most precious to His own heart. The Bible says, “Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?” (Romans 8:32 NLT) The same point is made in these Bible verses, “This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they’ve done to our relationship with God.” (1 John 4:9-10 MSG)

There’s one phrase in John 3:16 that really underlines the “primeness” or the “very bestness” of God’s gift: “one and only.” In the original Greek language of the New Testament it’s the word, *monogenes*. It’s used in other places in the Bible. For instance, we read, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.... No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” (John 1:14, 18 NIV) When the old King James Version of John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son...” it can give the impression unintentionally that somehow God the Father created or gave birth to God the Son. But, no, because the Son is God Himself He could not be created. Like God the Father, there has never been a time when God the Son didn’t exist. He, also, is eternal and infinite. He, too, has never known a beginning and will never know an end.

Instead, *monogenes* conveys the truth that Jesus is absolutely unique and one of a kind. The Bible says, “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son.” (Hebrews 11:17 NIV) Isaac wasn’t Abraham’s only son literally. His first born was Ishmael. When his first wife, Sarah, died, he remarried and had other sons. But only one son, Isaac, was considered the *monogenes* son of Abraham – the unique “one and only” son. Isaac was special, unique and set apart. By the same token, followers of Jesus like us are called children of God in the Bible and even sons and daughters of God, but only Jesus is ever called the *monogenes* Son. Jesus, the Son of God, has a unique relationship with God the Father. In Jesus we have the fullest, most complete revelation of God the Father. From Jesus lips and life, you learn everything you need to know about God. He is the *monogenes* – the absolutely unique, one and only Son.

So what? First, when God the Father gave God the Son, He gave you and me all there was to give – the very best gift and the prime gift. You can't ever ask God to give you more than He's already given. When He gave you Jesus, you got the best God had to give. You got everything God could give. Second, when God the Father gave God the Son, God gave Himself. A truly meaningful gift always involves the giving of yourself at a profound level. I read about a married couple counseling with their pastor. There was a tremendous amount of bitterness, lack of understanding and just hardness between this husband and wife. At one point the husband got exasperated and said to his wife, "I've given you everything. I've given you a new home. I've given you a new fur coat. I've given you a new car. I've given you...." And the list went on and on. But when he finished, his wife said quietly. "That much is true. You have given me everything, but yourself." When God the Father gave you God the Son in the person of Jesus, God gave Himself.

Third, when God the Father gave God the Son, His love was expressed in action. Certainly love can and should have a feeling – an emotional – aspect to it. But the greatest kind of love is always expressed in actions. At Christmas, God gave up His Son to be born in a stable and placed in a farm animal's feeding trough. God allowed His Son to be exposed to a world full of hate, injustice, evil, poverty and disease. God allowed His Son to endure the taunts and torture of Roman soldiers. God allowed His Son to be nailed to a cross. God the Father entered this world in the person of His Son in order to die for your sins and be raised again so that you might gain an eternal relationship with Him.

Something wonderful happens to people who receive the prime gift of Jesus into their hearts. They start to love like God loves. Their love gets expressed in action. Their love means the giving away and the giving up of yourself in specific ways. Right there we need to be careful, because it's easy to conclude that loving God or loving others with God's love demands something spectacular or sensational. Not so! I like how a man named Fred Craddock explains it. "We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table, 'Here's my life, Lord, I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that He sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to a neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time, ... little by little over the long haul."

Whenever you teach a Sunday School class or lead a club group on a Wednesday night, help prepare a meal for some church program, give your tithe faithfully, pray diligently for someone suffering from cancer, listen lovingly to a friend's heartache, invite someone to church, encourage someone to give his or her life to Jesus, feed a hungry person at a mission downtown, buy a bag of groceries for a hungry family – your love has moved out of the realm of the merely verbal into the realm of the actual. It's those small acts of love – 25 cents at a time – seemingly insignificant that are, nevertheless,

very important to God. Why? It's love in action! What makes a gift meaningful? It needs to be a planned gift, a prime gift, and – finally, it needs to be:

### **A PERFECT GIFT.**

What's a perfect gift? A perfect gift is something that meets the exact needs of the one to whom it's given. Let's suppose I wanted to give you a gift for Christmas. I save my money. I think a lot about what I'm going to give you. In other words, it's a planned gift. Let's suppose my gift to you is a three year old used car in great shape with 30,000 miles on it. It truly represents the very best I can give you. I had to scrimp and save to buy you that car. In fact I had to sacrifice greatly in order to get you that gift. That would make it a prime gift because it represents the very best I can give. There's only one problem. You already have a car! In fact, you have a one year old car with only 10,000 miles on it. You might appreciate my gift, but you don't really need it. A perfect gift is something that meets the exact needs of the one to whom it's given. When God gave Jesus to you, Jesus was a planned gift, a prime gift, but He's also a perfect gift. Why? Because He is exactly what you need!

Christmas is a time to reflect on how desperate you'd be if God hadn't given us the gift of His Son. Sometimes people want to keep Jesus as just a baby in a manger and never let Him grow up! When that happens, we miss why Jesus was ever born at all. To fail to see the cross behind the crib is to miss the reason for the crib. To fail to see the crucified form of Jesus behind the cuddly baby is to miss the reason for Christmas itself. A woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before. Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly scrunched up to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed, she blurted out, "Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!" A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said: "Don't worry. They already crucified him."

The Bible is full of reminders of why Jesus was born. For instance, turn with me just now to Romans 5:6-11. In that passage, you and I are referred to as "helpless, ungodly, sinners, enemies of God." Not very flattering, is it? The author, Paul, goes on to observe that Jesus gave up His life not for good, moral, worthwhile people but for those who were hateful of and hostile to God. There's the deepest meaning of Christmas – not just that Jesus was born but that He was born to die – to die for you and for me – to pay the penalty for our sin through His own death. Our condition was that desperate and hopeless. There was nothing we could do to save ourselves. So, God sent the perfect gift.

Jesus so wonderfully meets our need for a Savior. Through Jesus, God changed your status. Instead of being declared guilty, you've now been declared not guilty. Jesus paid your penalty by dying in your place. Instead of being an enemy, you've become

God's friend. Instead of being branded a sinner destined for eternal damnation, you've been honored as a son and an heir of eternal life. Through Jesus, God also changed your state. He declared you right in His eyes the moment you put your faith in Jesus, but now He is making you right through a gradual process going on throughout your entire journey of faith. That process of making you really good has begun and it will continue right up to the day you step through the door of heaven. But you can have hope and joy now because you know that God is finishing what He started in you.

There it stood—the best tree in the lot. It was Paul and Lisa Richardson's second Christmas as husband and wife. They decided to ditch the two-foot high plastic tree that had "graced" their coffee table the year before. They found the perfect real tree instead. It was wide at the base and came to a perfect point on top. With blissful Christmas cheer they paid \$25, somehow stuffed the tree into their compact car, and drove to their apartment. Paul cleared a spot next to the couch and set it up in the corner. At least he tried to set it up in the corner. The perfect tree immediately fell over. Multiple attempts only brought about the same result: the tree just wouldn't stand up. When Paul probed into the tree itself, he discovered his perfect tree had a huge flaw. The base of the tree began straight, but the middle of the trunk contorted in pretzel-like twists, bending this way and that, before coming out straight at the top. It was perfect on the outside but hopelessly flawed within. It could never stand on its own. Paul and Lisa finally had to string it up just to keep it upright.

That not-so-perfect Christmas tree tells the story of Christmas. On the outside we like to show that we have it all together: "Tis the season to be jolly!" But inside we know differently: hurts, pains, disappointments, anger, bitterness, and – most of all - sin. No matter how many ornaments Paul and Lisa hung on their tree, they knew it could never stand on its own. And no matter how many ornaments we attach to our lives, we can never be right with God on our own. The Christmas story is not about God the Father seeing how nice we were and coming down to spend time with lovely people. It's the story of God coming down in the person of His Son, Jesus, to die for twisted, hurting and sinful people.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son...." Christmas is a wonderful time of giving and receiving gifts. Let's remember that Jesus is the planned gift of God. Jesus is the prime gift of God. Jesus is the perfect gift of God.