

GOD'S GREATEST GIFT: THE GIVER

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20a)

12.6.20

INTRODUCTION

Last week, in Part 1 of this year's Christmas series, "God's Greatest Gift," we talked about how gifts have three (3) essential elements: the recipient of the gift, the giver of the gift, and the gift itself. We also mentioned that gifts usually come from one of two directions: something somebody wants, or something somebody needs.

Now, in talking about recipients, that first essential element, we learned from the genealogy Matthew includes at the very beginning of his gospel that the recipients of God's greatest gift were intended to be everybody - regardless of anything; in other words, there would be no disqualifying considerations. Which is a really good thing because, if it is true, as Paul wrote, that "***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God***" - ***Paul, Romans 3:23***, then any gift given to address that universal need resulting from the circumstances and consequences of sin could only be provided by Somebody who could provide a gift both immediately applicable to everybody and, just as important, immediately available to everybody. And beyond that, such a gift would also have to be absolutely user-friendly. Think about it: What's the point of a gift I can't use? And what's the point of a gift that's not available, or that I have to jump through impossible hoops to acquire? And what's the point of a gift I can't even figure out how it works? Only the greatness of God would be capable of providing that kind of gift - completely satisfying everybody's most urgent need - and that's Who we're going to be talking about today - the giver of our greatest Christmas gift. So as we begin, let's prepare our hearts by **turning to the Lord for a word of prayer.**

TEXT/ANALYSIS

"This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life" - Moses, Deuteronomy 30:19-20a.

There is so much treasure found in these few words from Moses, for they reflect what has always been God's perspective, that He has always desired that we "choose life" - that is, a life that shows itself in both listening to Him and holding fast to Him by keeping His commandments - thus allowing His greatest desire of all to come to pass: that we might have relationship with Him. The greatest possible outcome for our lives - eternal fellowship with our Heavenly Father - comes from choosing "life" as He defined it. But, at the same time, God has also always made three things absolutely clear: (1) what brings blessing and life, (2) what brings curse and death, and (3) it's our choice. You see, God didn't create robots. He created human beings endowed by Him with free will and, in this, as with all else, ***God saw all that He had made, and it was very good - Genesis***

l:31a.

So then, as representatives of all the people who were to follow, Adam and Eve had that same opportunity presented to them: ***life and death, blessings and curses***. God had explained that choice to Adam in the Garden of Eden: ***"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die"***- ***God speaking, Genesis 2:16b-17.***

So what happened? To put it mildly, they chose poorly. Satan's seductive tempting got them to focus not on the lives He had given them, nor on the amazing creation God had given them but, instead, on the one thing He had denied them. As a result, as Paul wrote: ***[S]in entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned ...Consequently ...one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people - Paul, Romans 5:12, 18a.*** So as the original choice by Adam and Eve - and all choices ever since - reflect the brokenness of man's relationship with God due to sin, it became impossible for man to "choose life." Mankind became imprisoned by that initial choice that was made back in the Garden. And what was worse, our choice proved what we actually wanted - living for ourselves instead of living for God. So any gift that was ever going to undo our choices couldn't have anything to do with our wants. We already had that - and it had destroyed us. We needed a gift that spoke to our need.

Now that gift was going to be, and only could be, based on one thing: the "amazing grace" of God's eternal, unbreakable love for us. We could not earn His favor; we could not do anything on our own to please Him.

But there's a problem, and unfortunately it is basically covered up by the self-serving ignorance of how our contemporary culture views God. Our culture by and large gives God credit for love (how very nice of them) - but it's a love that allows us to feel good about God without feeling a demand for anything in return. According to our culture, we're basically good people doing the best we can, and sometimes we just do the wrong stuff. But God understands; we're only human- and God is only love. And certainly the Bible tells us that God does in fact maintain a general love for all mankind; as Christ told it: ***"[Your Father in heaven] causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous"*** - ***Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:45b.*** So, no problem; I'm OK, you're OK. Right?

Folks, that is such a complete misrepresentation of who God truly is, a completely perfect God of unchanging holiness and righteousness. And that measure of holiness and righteousness considers much more than our actions; as the author of Hebrews wrote: ***Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account - Hebrews 4:13*** including, as He mentioned in the previous verse, ***the thoughts and attitudes of the heart - Hebrews 4:12b.***

So what we have here is one overarching fact: God hates sin - and the Bible makes that abundantly clear:

- 1) *You [O God] love righteousness and hate wickedness - Psalm 45:7a.*
- 2) *Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; You cannot tolerate wrongdoing - Habakkuk 1:13a.*

But it goes way beyond that. God not only hates sin, but God hates sinners:

- 1) *For You are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with You, evil people are not welcome. The arrogant cannot stand in Your presence. You hate all who do wrong; You destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful You, Lord, detest - David, Psalm 5:4-6.* The Hebrew verb SANE (saw-nay[^]) means to hate. It is the most frequent Hebrew word for "hate" in the OT. God hates all those who love cruelty and wickedness, all who do not keep His commandments. God hates all who do evil; thus, to fear God means to hate evil.
- 2) *[The Lord] observes everyone on earth; His eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, He hates with a passion [his soul hateth - KJV] - David, Psalm 11:4b-5.* NEPESH (neh[^]-fesh) - breath, the inner being with its thoughts and emotions. In this sense, it means that God hates sin right down to His innermost being; it is offensive to Him to His very core because it strikes at the very essence of who and what God is.

So, because we are literally sin personified, because we are sinners to our core, God's anger and hatred of sin rests not just on the sins - the things sinners do - but on sinners themselves. In other words, God's holy, righteous wrath against sin sits squarely on us. And to get just one example of just how strongly God communicates this, the first 50 psalms contain 14 specific instances where the psalmists tell us that God is hating not just the sin but the sinner. Clearly He wants us to know His feelings about all this.

As a result, our relationship with God is, in hospital terminology, in "extremely critical condition." As a consequence of the deadly disease of sin in our lives, *[our] iniquities have separated [us] from [our] God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear - Isaiah 59:2.* As we are, we can't have a relationship with Him. As we are, we can't even talk to Him.

And the NT reflects God's view towards sin and evil in a strikingly similar tone to the OT. Paul in writing to the Romans shared these well-known words: *God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us - Paul, Romans 5:8.* But a couple of verses later, Paul more clearly defines that idea of "sinners" by writing that Christ did His redemptive work *while we were God's enemies - Paul, Romans 5:10a.* The Greek word used there tells us that, as sinners, we are adversaries of God, His enemies; in fact, we hate Him.

So let's set the stage here. I mean, let's let this all sink in for a bit. We hate God. He hates sin - and He hates us because we sin. And sinning is all that we will ever be able

to do. And hating sin and sinners is all God will ever be able to do. He has a perfect righteousness and holiness that allows for nothing else. Any tolerance for sin and God quits being God. There are no other possibilities - for either side. I think they call this "the irresistible force meeting the immovable object."

So here we got two enemies. Neither side can change who they are. And worse even than that, one side specifically betrayed the other, turning their backs on all the gifts they had already received and walking away. And only one side wants things to change. What to do?

Thankfully, while one side operates in sin, the other side operates in "amazing grace" - undeserved favor. So God, the only one who can, prepares and then gives one more gift - the greatest gift He could possibly give - an opportunity for us to choose life.

APPLICATION

In giving us His greatest gift, the gift we celebrate every Christmas, God tells us so much about Himself:

- 1) God's greatest gift is a testament to His love: "***God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son" - Jesus Christ, John 3:16a.*** The Greek verb used here for "love" is AGAPAO (ag-ap-ah[^]-o). I so appreciate how British theologian W.E. Vine defines this word as it relates to God: *God's love is seen in the gift of His Son. But obviously, this is not the love of complacency, or affection, that is, it was not drawn out by any excellency in its objects. It was an exercise of the divine will in deliberate choice, made without assignable cause save that which lies in the nature of God Himself...It expresses the deep and constant "love" and interest of a perfect Being towards entirely unworthy objects.* No wonder the Holy Spirit inspired the apostle John to write the words: ***God is love - I John 4:8b.*** Love isn't just something God does. Love is the very essence of what God is.
- 2) God's greatest gift is a testament to His grace: Remember that justice is getting what we deserve, and mercy is not getting what we deserve. But grace? What a wondrous thing to consider: Grace is getting what we don't deserve. This truth goes all the way back to the book of Genesis, just as Noah and his family are preparing to leave the ark. Now God in that very moment knows that our attraction to sin will never change. Nevertheless, God in His "amazing grace" vowed: "***Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" - God speaking, Genesis 8:21b.*** Or, to put it in our "greatest gift" analogy, this Giver painstakingly prepared a gift reflecting His love and meeting a need of recipients, knowing all the while that many of the intended recipients would reject and ignore the gift, and knowing all the while that many of those intended recipients would continue to hate the Giver of the gift. That's the

grace that resonated so deeply with the apostle Paul, as he wrote to his pastor friend Titus: ***"[T]he grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people - Paul, Titus 2:11.*** That grace is what appeared in a manger - an animal's feeding trough - to the shepherds, the wise men ... and to us. As Paul affirmed in his second letter to Timothy, God's greatest gift was found in grace because ***[H]e saved us not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace - Paul, II Timothy 1:9a.***

- 3) God's greatest gift is a testament to His greatest desire - relationship: ***This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins - I John 4:9-10.*** What did God's greatest gift accomplish? It provided, in the person of that greatest gift, Jesus Christ, "an atoning sacrifice" for our sins. What does that mean? Well, to "atone" means to make amends or reparation. That's what God's greatest gift was given to accomplish: restoration of our relationship with God by means of an atonement, or propitiation, a "satisfying," literally a covering of our sins so that a perfect God could see that same perfection in us. And, to make sure we don't miss the message, God made sure that His word contained the message of His desire for us - both in the OT and NT:
- a) ***"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" declares the Sovereign Lord. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" - God speaking, Ezekiel 18:23.***
 - b) ***[God our Savior] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth - Paul, I Timothy 2:4.***
 - c) ***[The Lord is] not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance - II Peter 3:9b.***

And in telling us so much about Himself, God just as fully proclaims an example for every member of the Kingdom - and one that absolutely cannot get lost in all the busyness and focus (and sometimes chaos) of the holidays, and it's this: As God reacted to our sins with grace - and never was there a greater "injured party" than God - we are to react with the same grace when somebody wrongs us. And the Bible shares commands that reflect God's righteous expectations:

- 1) ***[I]t is written: "Be holy, because I am holy" - I Peter 1:16 (quoting God speaking, Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2)***
- 2) ***"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" - Jesus Christ, Luke 6:36.***
- 3) ***"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:48.***
- 4) ***BOTTOM LINE: Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children - Paul, Ephesians 5:1.***

What greater gift to give those around us - whether family, friends, acquaintances, or people we don't even know - than a reflection of God's amazing love sustained by God's amazing grace!

CONCLUSION

This is the wonder of Christmas - "God's greatest gift." All hope of relationship with God was gone. On our own, there was no chance to restore what sin had so completely damaged. In short, we needed a Savior. And that's exactly what God's amazing grace, His "agape" love, provided - and it was first broadcast to a group of lowly shepherds, watching their flocks by night: ***"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" - Luke 2:11 (KJV).***

It comes down to this: If we don't need a Savior, then we don't need Christmas. God's greatest gift won't mean a thing until we recognize our desperate need for a Savior.

The world thinks it's fine, reducing God's greatest gift to a holiday driven by lists of things we want. We're here to tell the world otherwise - that God's greatest gift came to meet our greatest need, and it's not something you will find at a store or online: salvation, new life, born again. Sins washed away, to be remembered no more. That's Christmas.

Think of all the people we know who do not yet know that Christmas story, the true Christmas story, the one-and-only Christmas story. God's greatest gift: Let's share that greatest gift with others as God shared His greatest gift with us - with love, grace and His wonderful word. Let's pray!