

The Best Gift of Christmas

Matthew 1:18-23

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to the gospel of Matthew, Matthew chapter 1. We're going to be looking together at verses 18 to 23 today. For the last number of years we have focused on themes during December relating to the incarnation and nativity of Christ and we're going to do that again this year looking at what we're calling, "Christmas in the Gospels" — how each of the four gospels inform our understanding of the incarnation and the nativity of Jesus Christ. Now many of you will, because you're good Bible scholars, immediately know that there are no nativity accounts in Mark and in John, and so you may be wondering how we're going to relate those things to the birth of Christ. Well, it's going to be rather apparent I think. When we're in the first verses of Mark next week, you'll see how they relate very directly to what we're going to be studying today. And of course John, though he does not give us a nativity account, has the marvelous prologue which culminates with those words, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory." And so we'll be thinking about Christmas in the gospels together this month.

This morning, we're in the passage in which the angel makes a great announcement to Joseph, and as we look at that passage together, I'd like you to be asking yourself a question — a question about the gift that you need and want. Have you given much thought to what you need this Christmas or to what you want this Christmas? Those questions are a little bit different, actually. Sometimes what we need is not what we want and sometimes what we want is not what we need, but if you've thought about that much — and if I can ask the young people that are here today, as you think about Christmas, can you remember what you got last year? Some of you probably can. Some of you probably got some things that you still remember receiving, but I'll bet there are a lot of you who don't even remember what you got last year. Well, let me ask a related question. What's the best Christmas gift that you've even gotten? What was the best gift of Christmas? This passage points us to two best gifts of Christmas and they have to do with what we need and what we ought to want. So be thinking about what your best gift of Christmas was and what you need and what you want as we read this passage in God's Word. Let's pray before we do.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we need it because we don't live just by what we eat or drink, we live by Your Word. Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, so speak to us Lord; Your servants listen. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

This is God's Word. Hear it, beginning in Matthew 1 verse 18:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, so not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Well, have you remembered? Do you remember what you got last year? Have you both remembered what you wanted and what you got last year? And what's your answer to the question — what was your best Christmas gift ever? For some of us that's a hard answer to give because the Lord has been very kind to us and has given us very significant gifts. As I've looked back over the various Christmases of my life, one that stands out to me was a Christmas when there really wasn't much under the tree and there wasn't a significant Christmas dinner prepared because just a couple of days before Christmas my two year old brother had a seizure and almost died. And we rushed him to the hospital as a family and our family pediatrician met us there at the emergency room and ushered him in with the emergency physicians and they worked on him and they were able to revive him. And because of that and because of the follow-up medical treatment, we weren't able to get the final preparations for Christmas ready, and so from the standpoint of gifts, it wasn't much of a Christmas, but it stood out to us all of my years at home as one of the best Christmases ever because I still had a baby brother. And he's grown up to be a husband and a father and an elder in the church, so that Christmas becomes more significant to me as the years go on — the kindness of God in sparing his life. And I do think that one of the things that we find as we get older is that in terms of the earthly gifts that God gives us, the most significant gifts that He gives to us are people, not just the things that we get. As kind as He is to give us things, wonderful things, lots of things, He's so kind to give us people. And some of the greatest gifts that we ever receive are the people that He gives to us.

But have you thought more about the question — What do you need for Christmas and what do you want for Christmas? You know, there's one gift that we all need and without it, no other gift matters. And there's one gift that we should all want because that gift is what we were made for and this passage teaches us that Jesus came so that we could receive both those gifts — what we need and what we ought to want. The one gift that we need, without which no other gift matters, is the gift of forgiveness. Without forgiveness, none of the other manifold blessings of God will matter eternally. And of course, without the gift of forgiveness, both human relationships and our relationship with God are compromised. There are many of us in this room who realize how important forgiveness is to human relationships. That's why one PCA teaching elder likes to say, "People don't fall out of love; they fall out of forgiveness." Forgiveness is very important in human relationships but it's absolutely essential in our relationship to God because we're sinners and we need to be forgiven. But here's the thing. There are a lot of sinners who need to be forgiven who don't know they need to be forgiven or who don't adequately understand their need for forgiveness and they do not adequately value the gift of forgiveness. This passage teaches us that Jesus came so that we could receive that gift, and we won't receive that gift until we understand how absolutely necessary it is.

But this passage also teaches us about the other gift. There's a gift that we all ought to want, because if you don't receive this gift, you cannot be who you were created for, and that gift is fellowship with God. God made us to fellowship with Him. God made us to experience His presence, to commune with Him, to enjoy Him, to converse with Him, to delight in Him. He made us for that kind of mutual enjoyment, and unless you want that gift above all others, you cannot be who you were created to be. So there is a gift that we all need — forgiveness — and without that gift no other gift matters and the second gift can't be enjoyed. You can't enjoy fellowship with God without forgiveness. And the second gift is the gift that we all ought to want, and without it, we cannot be what we were created for. This passage tells us that Jesus came in order that we might receive both of those gifts and I want to meditate on that with you for a few moments today.

WE OUGHT TO YEARN FOR FORGIVENESS

First of all, and you can go ahead and look at verses 20 and 21, remember the context of this. Mary and Joseph are betrothed. That means something a good bit more than engagement means in our culture. When you were betrothed in their culture, you were actually considered to be formally related as husband and wife but the marriage ceremony was not yet; sometimes it was twelve months later. The couple did not engage in marital relations in those times and that empathized in this passage that though Mary and Joseph were betrothed, he had not been with her. And so, when he comes to find out that Mary is expecting a child, he naturally assumes that she has been unfaithful to him and it breaks his heart no doubt and he begins to think about what to do. And that's the context of

our passage. If you've ever thought about it, Christmas begins with an almost divorce. Joseph is beside himself. The woman that he loves has apparently been unfaithful to him. And he begins to consider what to do and we're told in this passage that he was a just man and he didn't want to publically humiliate Mary, and so what he decided to do was instead of publically castigating her in front of the community, just to quietly seek a divorce. And in the context of that consideration, God sent an angel to him and that angel said to him, "Joseph, what Mary has told you is true. The child that has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." And it's really hard for us, I think, to even comprehend how glad Joseph's heart would have been to know that the woman that he loved was telling him the truth, that her integrity was intact, that their relationship was going to go forward.

But what the angel then said to him was even more marvelous than that. And we see it, don't we, in verses 20 and 21 — "Joseph, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." The angel tells Joseph that the child that Mary is going to bear is going to save His people from their sins. He is going to bring about the salvation of His people through the forgiveness of their sins. Through the shedding of His own blood, He is going to bear the due penalty for their sins. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord," and Jesus is going to come and bear the sins of His people for the salvation of His people from their sins. He is going to come in order that they might receive the gift of forgiveness. Now our point this morning is not so much to focus on how we receive the gift of repentance, or the gift of forgiveness. We'll learn about that next Lord's Day as we look at Mark chapter 1 in the first four verses. How do you receive this gift of forgiveness? The thing I want us to concentrate on right now is this — do we realize how important that gift is? Do we realize the greatness of our need for forgiveness? It is the gift without which no other gift matters. If we do not have forgiveness, we do not have the one essential thing that we need because we are sinners. We have rebelled against God and rejected Him; we deserve His condemnation. The one, absolutely essential thing that we need is forgiveness. Do we realize that? Do you know that that's the gift you need this Christmas more than anything else is forgiveness?

You know, I think that's something that a lot of us don't adequately reckon with because if we did, a couple of things would show in our lives. People who really realize that the greatest thing that they need is forgiveness become forgiving people and people who realize that the greatest thing that they need is forgiveness become loving people. "Those," Jesus says, "who are forgiven much, love much." We would be a more forgiving and a more loving people if we realize how much we need forgiveness and how much God has done for us that we might be forgiven. But in this passage, we're taught that Christmas is about the gift of forgiveness. The coming of Jesus in this world, the incarnation of Christ, the birth of Christ, the nativity of Christ, is about the forgiveness of sins. "You will

call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” That's the gift that all of us need and without it no other gift matters.

WE OUGHT TO YEARN FOR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

But this passage also points us to that second gift that we were talking about a few moments ago. It points us to that gift that we all ought to want. After Matthew records the angel's words to Joseph, he goes on to say this: “All of this fulfills” — what? It fulfills Scripture. It fulfills — look with me at verse 22 — it fulfills what the Lord has spoken by the prophet Isaiah and in verse 23 he says, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” Now Matthew is telling you there that Jesus’ forgiveness of His people's sins is going to bring about the realization that the Old Testament prophets talked about all the time. You remember the phrase that echoes throughout the Old Testament is, “I will be your God and you will be My people and I will dwell with you in your midst.” That is the supreme expression of the purposes of God in redemption repeated frequently in the Old Testament and in the New and Matthew is saying, “That's what Jesus came for. He came to save you from your sins so that you could experience God with us, so that you could experience the presence of God, fellowship with God, friendship with God, because that is the gift that we all ought to want. It's what we were created for.”

In Genesis 3:8, we're told that God came walking in the cool of the day in the garden. It was apparently a regular occurrence to fellowship with Adam, but that Adam “hid himself from the presence of God.” That's because he and Eve had rebelled against God; in the early verses of Genesis 3 that's recorded. He “hid himself from the presence of God.” Now that phrase may not mean much to you other than he was trying to stay out of God's sightline lest he get into trouble, but that phrase, “hid himself from the presence of God,” is very significant. Turn back with me to the book of Exodus, Exodus chapter 32. And just look at the first verses of Exodus 32. That's the story of the golden calf. Keep your finger there. You remember the story — the children of Israel created an idol and began to worship it in disobedience to God's commands and God declared that He was going to bring judgment on His people and Moses interceded for them. And so God said, “Okay, I'm not going to destroy the people as they deserve.” But if you'll look now — turn forward to Exodus 33 verse 3 — God tells Moses, “I'm not going to destroy the people, but here's what I'm going to do — go up to the land flowing with milk and honey for I will not go up in your midst because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way.” In other words, He says to Moses, “I'm not going to kill the people here but I'm not going to go up in their midst. I'm not going to be in their midst. I'm not going to be present with them in their midst.” And Moses' response is, “Don't do that Lord. Don't give us the Promised Land without giving us Yourself. In fact, if You're going to give us the Promised Land without giving us Yourself, well I'd just rather not go. Why don't You just get it over right here in the wilderness,” because for Moses the big thing

in life was enjoying the presence of God, was knowing fellowship with God. And God in His kindness — look forward to Exodus 33 verse 14 — God in His kindness says to Moses, “My presence shall go with you and I will give you rest.” And Moses says, “Good, because if Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here.”

You see, the presence of God, fellowship with God, is the thing that Moses valued most. Why? Because it's what God created us for, that's why what Moses records in Genesis 3:8 is so tragic. Adam and Eve are doing what? They are hiding from the presence of God. They are hiding from the one thing for which they were created — the enjoyment of the presence of God. That's a picture of what sin does. In sin, we hide ourselves from the one thing that we were created for. And Matthew is telling you that Jesus came so that forgiven sinners can experience what they were created for — the enjoyment of the presence of God.

J.I. Packer put it this way many years ago in his wonderful book, *God Has Spoken*. “God created us for friendship with Himself, to enjoy fellowship and communion with Him. He wanted there to be genuine, personal affection, friendship, and two-sided relationship between Him and us.” We are created for that friendship. Just like the relationship between a husband who passionately love his wife or a good father who adores his daughter or son or between two dear friends who would give their lives for one another and who delight in one another and treasure one another's fellowship — God created us for that fellowship with Him. That is what we were made for but we must receive that as a gift because we've rebelled against Him. And Matthew is telling us Jesus came so that we could receive those gifts.

Now again, next week as we look at Mark, we'll talk more about how you receive those gifts, but the question I want to press home with you today is — Do you realize that you need the first gift, forgiveness, and do you want the second gift? Your answer to that question, to those questions, is telling. If you don't realize you need the first gift you don't understand the Gospel. If you don't want the second gift then you have not set your heart on the greatest treasure that exists — fellowship with God Himself. I hope this Christmas, more than anything, that you want to be a forgiven friend of God and that after that you want your children and your neighbors to be forgiven friends of God. And it's my prayer that that priority will reflect itself in everything you think and say and do in this season. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the incarnation of Jesus Christ who came to save us from our sins and to usher us in to fellowship with God. And we ask that by Your Holy Spirit we would understand that need and we would crave that heavenly desire of fellowship with You in a new and fresh way this Christmas season. In Jesus' name, amen.

Now would you take your hymnals out and turn with me to number 197 and we're

going to sing the first two stanzas of “Comfort, Comfort Ye My People,” a hymn based on Isaiah 40. You’ll see how it picks up on the themes that we’ve just studied. Stanzas 1 and 2 of number 197.

One of the glories of the Gospel is that God does not say to us, “Do the things that are necessary that I forgive you.” He does the things that are necessary for us to be forgiven. That is the Gospel of grace. Receive it and all its blessings.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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