



Christmas was an exciting time and Johnny was excited too; as excited as any 10-year-old boy could be. For him Christmas was still a time of wonder. He did the things most 10-year-olds do. He played ball, rode his bike, climbed trees, went fishing with his dad. He was a happy kid. He just enjoyed life, every part of life. To him life was full of wonder and amazement. And Christmas was the most wonderful time of all.

It was Christmas Eve and the ground was white with snow. It was cold and clear. The stars were bright. The family was on their way to the grandparent's house—that was the family tradition. Johnny could hardly wait. His mind raced with ideas about what present would be under the tree for him tonight.

Every year they'd gather at grandpa and grandma's house. There was always a huge tree and there was always presents under the tree for everyone. The kids would seek sneak peeks to find out where theirs were located. Johnny was usually one of the first to find out where his present was placed, but this year it was different. He didn't find his right away, even though he searched all over.

He began to worry. Then his eyes caught a big box in the corner. It was huge. He slowly walked over to it and sure enough written on the tag was his name. He grinned from ear to ear, his eyes wide with excitement.

Grandpa always handed out the presents. He wasn't very fast but this year he seemed especially slow and wouldn't you know it, Johnny's name was the last one called. When it was, he bolted up to Grandpa, "Is this really mine, is that big present really mine?" Grandpa reassured him it was. He tore into the package and what do you think he found in that large box? It was the best Christmas gift he'd ever received.

What do you think it was? We all have ideas of what the best present is, don't we? We can all picture it in our mind. How do you measure the value of a gift? How do you judge its worth? By its size? By its weight? Its cost? Its uniqueness?

What I'd like to do this morning is examine God's gift to us. Imagine it's wrapped up, it has bows on it, it's standing in the corner and it's large. Follow along with me as I read from God's Word. ***"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"*** (1 John 4:9-10).

It's quite clear in these verses that God's gift to us is his Son, Jesus. The gift isn't a thing, it's a person. At Christmas we remember this person was born in a manger over 2,000 years ago. Some of you legitimately wonder what's the big deal with a child born in a manger over 2,000 years ago? Why all the songs, carols, lights and cheesy TV movies? Four million babies are born each year in our country alone. Why is this child's birth so special? Why do we sing about one single child born so many years ago, far away in the Middle East? What's the big deal about this one? Why is this gift so valuable? We can measure the value of this gift in three ways:

The Value of God's Gift is Measured by Its Motive

First, God's gift is measured by its motive. All of us have received gifts where we've questioned the motive. It doesn't matter how awesome the gift is, if the motive of the giver is somehow in question, the value of the gift is diminished. Maybe someone was motivated by guilt or obligation. Maybe someone was motivated by a desire for others to see how generous they are or how what great taste they have. Those motives taint a gift no matter how big or expensive it is.

On the other hand, if a gift is motivated by love, it really doesn't matter what it is; we still appreciate it. Years ago when I was in junior high, I was taking wood shop and I made my mom a cutting board. My mom loved to cook and so I thought this was something she'd really use. At the time I thought it was a darn good cutting board, but now I realize it was probably very inadequate for her needs. It wasn't very big and I'm not even sure if it had a level surface. But here's the thing: my mom proudly displayed that cutting board in her kitchen and used it every chance she got. Now I understand that my mom had received and used my gift not because it was so great, but because she knew it was motivated by love.

These verses tell us the motive behind God's gift was love. John says, ***"This is how God showed his love among us..."*** And then later he says, ***"This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us..."*** So the One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas was the manifestation of God's love, and that love didn't come in response to our love. It wasn't like, "Okay, you gave me something, now I'll give you something, too." This gift was initiated solely by God.

There are many reasons God sent his Son. His Son would reveal his nature. His Son would accomplish salvation. His Son would

bring him glory. But the sweetest reason God sent his Son is that he loves us. You might even say he'd rather die than live without us. Max Lucado says, "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every Spring and sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk to him, he'll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and he chose your heart. And the Christmas gift he sent you in Bethlehem? Face it, friend. He's crazy about you."

God knows us perfectly. All things are open and laid bare before him: our darkest secret, our deepest shame, our stormy past, our worst thought, our hidden motive, our vilest imagination, even our vain attempts to cover it all up and appear to be something we're not. He sees all this, and yet he still loved us enough to send his Son.

The Value of God's Gift is Measured by Its Cost

God's gift is measured by its motive, but it's also measured by its cost. I know a gift doesn't have to be expensive to be meaningful and even valuable; cost is measured in many different ways. You can pay a lot of money for a gift and that's one way to measure cost. Or you can spend a lot of time finding a gift or even making a gift, and that's another way to measure cost. For some, time and energy are far more costly than money.

So how do we measure the value of God's gift in terms of cost? It says here "*he sent his one and only Son into the world.*" That was costly. We don't always think of that as costly, but it was. Theologians call this *kenosis*. It comes from the Greek word meaning "to empty." The word is used of God's Son Jesus in Philippians 2:7, "*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing (emptied himself) by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*"

That *kenosis* was part of the cost. God stepped from his throne, removed his robe of light and wrapped himself in skin. The light of the universe entered a dark womb. The One angels worship nestled himself in the placenta of a peasant, was birthed into the cold night, and then slept on cow's hay amidst the stench of dung and urine.

In September of 1940, Witold Pilecki, a Polish army captain, emptied himself in a costly way. He snuck into Auschwitz. That's right, **into** Auschwitz. He knew something was terribly wrong with the concentration camp and as a committed Christian and a Polish patriot he couldn't sit by and watch. He wanted to get information on the horrors of Auschwitz, but he knew he could only do that from the inside. So his superiors provided a false identity card with a Jewish name, and then Pilecki allowed the Germans to arrest him during a routine Warsaw street roundup. He was sent to Auschwitz and assigned inmate number 4859. He became just like any other prisoner—despised, beaten, and

threatened with death. A husband and father of two, he later said, "I bade farewell to everything I had known on this earth."

You might say Jesus bade farewell to everything he'd known in heaven. That was costly. But it didn't stop there. There was even a greater price to pay. John also says God the Father "*sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*" There was a cost in *kenosis*, but there was an even greater cost in the cross. In the same passage in Philippians, Paul goes on to say in verse 8, "*And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*" In order for us to be set free from sin and death a payment (ransom) had to be made. Throughout the Old Testament it was the blood of a spotless lamb that was shed year after year to pay for the sins of God's people, but that was just a picture of God's once-for-all solution: his spotless Son would shed his own blood. That's what the angel was talking about when he said to Joseph, "...he will save his people from their sins." He didn't do that through his birth, but through his death.

During China's Cultural Revolution, Christians were often sentenced to hard labor in prison camps. Maintaining their faith was hard, and expressing it was harder. Christmas 1961 found the prisoners working on earthen walls around rice paddies in zero temperatures. Wind howled over the frozen ground. One prisoner approached his supervisor and asked for some time off from work since it was Christmas. The guard gave him permission, warning him to beware of the warden. The old man walked into a gully, out of sight, out of the wind. He built a small fire and began to celebrate Christmas. A few minutes later the friendly guard saw the warden headed straight for them. He hurried over to warn the old prisoner, just in time to see him sipping something from a chipped cup, and eating a bite of bread. When the warden arrived, all he saw was a prisoner and a guard huddled by a small fire. But the prisoner had completed his Christmas celebration, not with a banquet or with sweets, but with a cold cup and a cold crust—with Communion. His celebration of Christmas demanded Communion.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we also remember the purpose for which he came. He came on a mission. He came to die for us. His *kenosis* was costly; his cross was even costlier. The birth of God's Son is wonderful and mysterious, but it's for nothing apart from his death on the cross. Our awe over his birth isn't just that he came, but that he came to be crucified for you and for me.

The Value of God's Gift is Measured by Its Usefulness

God's gift is measured by its motive and by its cost. There's one more thing. It's also measured by its usefulness. What's the usefulness of that gift to us? Notice in verse 9 the usefulness of the gift—"*that we might live through him.*" So God's gift has the ultimate practical value in that it gives us life. "Life" in this

sense doesn't mean physical existence, but it means spiritual life; eternal life with God that starts now. Later in this letter John writes, “...*God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life*” (1 John 5:11-12).

Jesus said it this way: “*I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly*” (John 10:10) What a promise! Not just life, not just existence, but life which means something, life that has worth, life with a purpose, life which has value, life with meaning. A life with eternal consequences and benefits.

Part of that means we have a purpose. One of the most beloved songs of Christmas started out as an advertising gimmick. In 1939 Montgomery Ward tapped advertising executive Robert May to write a poem their store Santa Claus could give away to children who came to visit him. “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” first appeared in a little booklet published by the department store chain. More than 2.5 million copies were handed out. By 1946 more than 6 million copies of the poem were distributed. Rudolph's story came to musical life in 1949 when May's brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, wrote the music. After it was turned down by Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore, singing cowboy Gene Autry recorded it. Today *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* is the highest-selling Christmas carol, at more than 25 million units.

What makes this little carol so loved? Some people might say it's the courage of Rudolph, the alleged hero of the story. But the real beauty of the story focuses on grace. By grace, Santa chooses Rudolph despite the fact he's a clear outsider and “reject.” He has a defect—his big, annoyingly shiny red nose—that has usually disqualified him from getting chosen for other reindeer games. But despite all the other available candidates, who did Santa choose when the fog rolled in? That's right, the one with the weird shiny red nose. The “weakness” that was considered a liability by Rudolph and his fellow reindeer became the “strength” that Santa used to accomplish his mission.

Ephesians 2:10 says, “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*” You were specially created, hand

crafted, uniquely made for the purpose of bringing glory to God. Your purpose is to live a life that magnifies the Lord, to use your gifts and talents in helping others, to tell those who don't know Jesus that there's Good News. Your purpose is to bring glory to God in all you do and say, so that when all is said and done, you'll hear the words: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” God's gift of his Son is useful. It gives us life. Despite our weaknesses, it gives us meaning and value and purpose. Our purpose is to bring glory to God.

God has given us the gift of his Son. The value of that gift is seen in its motive, cost and usefulness. Its motive was love. Its cost was both his self-emptying and his cross. Its usefulness is that through this gift we get real life that lasts throughout eternity.

I read recently that 39.2 percent of shoppers will purchase a department store gift card for friends and family, followed by 33.4 percent of shoppers opting for a restaurant gift card. But according to estimates reported in the Journal of State Taxation, the typical American home has an average of \$300 in unused or “unredeemed” gift cards. These cards are often misplaced, accidentally thrown out, or only partially redeemed. Between 2005 and 2011, \$41 billion in gift cards went unused.

I wonder if God's gift to you will be redeemed and used or just left in a drawer? You see, God has given us the costliest gift imaginable, but just like all the gifts you'll be given on Christmas day, you have to receive it and open it and use it. Will you do that? To begin with that means you believe it and you receive it. You receive Jesus Christ into your life and trust in him as your Savior. Then you begin to learn what it means to follow him and enjoy him and love him. A Christmas card says it well, “The Word did not become a philosophy to be discussed, a theory to be debated, or a concept to be pondered. The Word became a Person to be followed, enjoyed, and loved.” Will you do that?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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