

The "There's Something Wrong With You, but I Won't Say It Directly" Gift. Your aunt gives you a box of acne soap as a gift. It's like saying, "I love you, but I can't stand to look at your face." What's worse, it may not help the complexion at all.

The "I Bought ME This" gift. Most commonly given by a man. A waffle iron, for example, which is really a way of saying, "Honey, now you can make me waffles! Aren't you excited?" In fact, any kitchen appliance fits into this category. So does lingerie. Nothing says, "I bought me this" like a gift bag from Victoria's Secret!

The Worthless Novelty Gift. How about a wallet that looks like it's made out of bacon, or "Handerpants" (underwear for your hands)? This is stuff you find in the bargain bin at that sketchy store at the mall. The giver says, "She'll get a kick out of this!" Trust me, she won't.

The Cheapskate Gift. This is the gift of things like excess office supplies lifted from work, or the "free gift" that came with the actual gift you purchased for someone else. A sub-category would be the "re-gift" - something the giver received, hated and pass on to transfer to you.

The Passive-Aggressive Mother-in-Law Gift. A young woman once received the "gift" of a flame-throwing weed killer from her mother-in-law. The instructions said it was for killing weeds, but warned that if you didn't hold it absolutely upright it was liable to back up and explode. It's the gift that says, paradoxically, "I love you and I hope you die horribly in a way by which I can blame someone else."

It's easy to get caught up in the message a particular gift might be sending, for good or ill. Christmas Eve reminds us, however, that there's one gift whose message is consistent every year and for every person. In sending Jesus Christ into the world of human experience, *God sent a strong message about divine love and grace.*

"The grace of God has appeared," says Paul to Titus, speaking of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world (v. 11). Paul actually adopted the Greek word for "gift" (*charis*) since there was no special word in the language for "grace." Grace is the gift of God and it appeared with the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

This is no ordinary gift like we give at Christmas. The presence of bad gifts under the tree indicates that we tend to give gifts *based on the apparent worth of the recipient*. Not crazy about your daughter's boyfriend? He might get a \$20 gift card for Walmart (if he's lucky). On the other hand, our best gifts tend to be given to those we most love and esteem.

Paul understood, however, that God gave the world a gift that was immeasurably precious, and God did so in lavish measure to everyone regardless of the worthiness of the recipient. Indeed, no one is worthy of such a priceless gift since we are all sinners who have no room to boast about our standing or accomplishments before God (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 5:8). Truth be told, we deserve the lousiest of gifts, yet God gives us only the very best. God gives us Jesus. God gives God to the world!

How to say "Thank you!" This gift appears wrapped and ready in a manger on Christmas, bringing "salvation to all" (v. 11). It's a gift on offer to everyone who will simply unwrap and receive it. But how do we receive it and what does it do for us? It's not only the most lavish of gifts; it's also a gift that requires some practical use in order to be fully realized.

At Christmas, we often give gifts with no expectation of reciprocation. We buy our kids the toy they've been wanting "forever" (meaning at least two weeks), but we don't expect them to pony up a package under the tree for us. We might give a lousy or lazy gift out of some sense of obligation to a coworker, but we don't really hope for anything in return.

When a gift was given in the ancient world, however, there was always an expectation of reciprocity, especially between a patron and a client. No simple thank-you note was enough. You needed to respond with a commensurate gift of your own.

The "gift" of grace works the same way. When Paul talks about the gift, he always couches it in terms of response. We love to read Ephesians 2:8-9, for example, but we often miss the fact that verse 10 calls us to do the good works for which we were created in Christ Jesus, "which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." The gift of grace in the life of Jesus *requires the response of giving our lives* - not just our intellectual assent to the idea of grace, but the actual, practical living out of the gift in our everyday lives.

That practical response to the gift of grace is Paul's concern in writing to Titus. Paul doesn't merely talk about the gift of God as something we receive and rejoice in for ourselves: this gift requires a response. The gift is given for the purpose of "training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly" (v. 12). The gift not only redeems us from the blemishes of sin; it also purifies us for the work of being "a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (v. 14). In other words, grace not only makes us cleaner than any "Soap-on-a-Rope" ever could; it also fires us up in a good way!

Grace is the gift that prepares and equips us for the redeeming and purifying work of God's kingdom in the present, "while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (v. 13). Christ, the gift, has come not only to save us *from* sin and death; he has come to save us *for* the good, redemptive work he prepared for us to do. We call this "sanctifying grace," the gift that shapes us into the people God has called us to be.

God's gift is a message. On Christmas Eve, it's easy to think about the kind of gifts we want to receive in the morning. Sure, there will probably be some clunkers in the mix, maybe even that bacon wallet. These are the gifts about which we can laugh for years. Most of them will be consigned to the junk drawer and then find their way into a donation pile where some other lazy or passive-aggressive soul will stumble over them, buy them for cheap, and give them to some other unsuspecting rube the next Christmas.

The gift of grace, however, is different. It is a gift *exquisitely designed to send the right message to the recipient*. God's gift sends the message that we are loved, that God desires our salvation, that God sees us as worthy.

God's gift begs for us to respond. How can we not respond to this fabulous gift except by offering our lives in service? Moreover, because God's gift is the best gift, it is a gift we must share with others. It's never to be kept simply for our own use. God's gift *always comes to us on its way to someone else!* It's a gift that calls us to give ourselves to God and to others in return. When we consider the magnitude of God's saving gift to us in Jesus Christ, we can respond with joy!

Prayer: O God of love, you have brought us together tonight and blessed us with your very self. Open our eyes to the light of Christ which glows in the darkness of a world engulfed in apathy, pain and loss; a world separated from you. Speak to us now that we may hear the good news of your salvation. Bring us into the wonder of your presence. Fill us with that light and carry it out with us into our lives. Amen

Sources:

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The Best Gift

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Titus 2:11-14

I love wrapping Christmas presents! It's kind of an obsession with me: finding the right wrapping paper, making the corners sharp, matching ribbons and bows – I get a real thrill out of Christmas wrapping. I start weeks in advance, slowly adding them under the tree. In fact, I start so early I often forget what I've wrapped, so I have to keep lists and label things carefully.

But before I can wrap, I have to find the right gift for each person. Kids are fairly easy to shop for when it comes to Christmas gifts. As a parent, I've learned a few things about gift-giving for kids: you can't go wrong with the long sought-after toy or a book, but keep the socks, underwear, pajamas and homemade knitted sweaters to a minimum.

When shopping for adults, however, we can have problems, *particularly when it comes to sending the right message to the recipient*. It can be torture to shop for great-uncle Joe or Great Grandma Betty or second cousin Barry. You ask yourself, "Is it the right gift? Is it the right size? Is it good enough, big enough, or thoughtful enough? Does it send a right message, conveying how I feel about the recipient?"

Sometimes, it's a message of love characterized by the meticulous search for exactly the right gift that will bring a smile to the face of a loved one. Sometimes, though, it's a message of last-minute desperation or even distaste - a way of saying, "I don't care enough about you to actually prepare and plan ahead of time. Instead, I will wait until the last minute and get you something you'll hate."

These are the kind of gifts that become the "worst gifts" every year. These are the gifts that cause the recipient to stare at the giver blankly, wondering what possibly could have entered the mind of the giver when purchasing it.

Some of these gifts are so bad, so thoughtless, that it's clear that the giver didn't even purchase it at all. If gifts are a kind of relational currency indicating how we really feel about one another, then a bad gift says that you care enough to send the very least. Here are a few (no need to use them all) examples: