

Theme: “Christmas Traditions” – Gift Giving

Text: James 1:17-18 (EHV)

¹⁷ Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights, who does not change or shift like a shadow. ¹⁸ Just as he planned, he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of firstfruits of his creations.

With Thanksgiving in the rear-view mirror now, many people have transitioned into full-on “Christmas-prep mode.” As we begin the season of Advent today we are, in a spiritual sense doing the same thing: Shifting into full-on “Christmas-prep mode” by looking ahead to the birth of Christ on Christmas.

For many people there are a number of treasured “**Christmas Traditions**” that they and their family do each year in preparation for, and in celebration of, Christmas. There are also a number of “**Christmas Traditions**” we do in our worship services and in our homes during the season of Advent and Christmas to prepare our hearts for the celebration of the birth of Christ at Christmas. This year during the season of Advent and Christmas we will be taking a look at five popular “**Christmas Traditions**” and consider how they can help us truly prepare for and celebrate the coming of Christ—both at His birth in Bethlehem so long ago, and at His second coming which could be at any time. We pray that the Holy Spirit would bless our study during this blessed season of Advent (which is a word that means “*coming*”).

If you had to pick 5 of your favorite “**Christmas Traditions**,” which ones would you pick? If we were to do this “Family Feud” style and put the top 5 answers on the board from a survey of 100 people across the country would the 5 you picked line up with theirs? Would the 5 “**Christmas Traditions**” I picked for the four Sunday’s in Advent and one on Christmas Day match up with the top 5 that most people would pick? Maybe. But I bet if the survey was made up mostly of children I could guess what the #1 “**Christmas Tradition**” would be on their list: **Gift Giving!** (Let’s be honest, it’s probably pretty high on your top 5 list as adults too, right?)

Isn’t **Gift Giving** one of your most treasured “**Christmas Traditions?**” I know it is and has always been for me. Some of the most glorious Christmas memories I had as a child were the days after my parents had wrapped our presents and finally placed them under the tree. What a sight! All those different sized boxes with shiny wrapping paper and ribbons and bows! My brothers and sisters and I would immediately “scope out” the piles around the tree to find out which ones were ours (and if my parents weren’t around we usually then picked up a few of them to shake them to try and figure out what was inside!). We just couldn’t wait to see what we’d gotten for Christmas. It’s true, for most everyone **gifts** are a very big part of Christmas. Unfortunately for many it is the “reason for the season.”

But do you know the original reason **gifts** were given out at Christmas? I’ve read that gift giving at Christmas actually has its origins with St. Nicolas (yes, the man on whom the fictional “Santa Clause” was based). St. Nicolas was known for his generosity and charitable deeds throughout the year, but he also was known for giving **gifts** at Christmas as a symbolic reminder of the greatest “**Gift**” God sent us when He gave us the Gift of His Son Jesus. And so, **gifts** at Christmas were originally meant to be a celebration of the ultimate “**Gift**” of Jesus’ presence among us—“Immanuel”: God with us. This symbolism and original meaning of giving **gifts** at Christmas has unfortunately been lost for the most part over the years.

Our text for this morning speaks about the **gifts** that our Heavenly Father gives: “**Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights**” (James 1:17 EHV). The ultimate “**perfect gift**” that God our Father gave us at Christmas was spelled out clearly for us in our Scripture reading from **Romans**: “**but the undeserved gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**” (Romans 6:23b). Like any true “**gift**” we realize that this gift of eternal life we have been given in Jesus is completely free and completely undeserved.

The end of our sermon text for today reminds us that even our faith in Jesus is an undeserved, free **gift** of our Heavenly Father's grace, by which He has made us His children: **"Just as he planned, he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of firstfruits of his creations"** (James 1:18 EHV).

Despite what some of the Christmas songs and some **"Christmas Traditions"** would have you believe, we do not actually get gifts at Christmastime depending on if we've been "naughty or nice." Imagine if that were true. If we only got gifts according to how "naughty or nice" we've been during the year, how many of us would have quite a few "lump of coal in the stocking" Christmases? I know I'd have had a few! The reality is the **gifts** we received from our parents and family members and friends at Christmas have nothing to do with how much we've "deserved" them, or how well we've performed to "earn" them. They were gifts—free gifts—given to us because the one who gave the **gift** loves us.

The same thing is true of the **"perfect Gift"** we received from our Heavenly Father. He did not give us a gift that we deserved. He did not base His "Christmas list" on whether or not we—or all of mankind for that matter—were "naughty or nice." Think back again to that verse from **Romans 6**. The first part of our text tells us about what we deserved from our Heavenly Father because of our sins...and it's a lot worse than a "lump of coal!" **"For the wages ["paycheck"] of sin"** our text tells us, **"is death"**—eternal death! (**Romans 6:23a**).

Fortunately, much like our earthly parents, our Heavenly Father didn't give us our **Present** according to what we deserved! He gave us a gift of His grace—His *"undeserved love"*—when He gave us His Son Jesus to win for us eternal life on the cross of Calvary. Listen again to some of the words of our Scripture reading from Romans chapter five, **"But the gracious gift is not like Adam's trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of this one man, it is even more certain that God's grace, and the gift given by the grace of the one man Jesus Christ, overflowed to the many!"**¹⁶ **And the gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin, for the judgment that followed the one trespass resulted in a verdict of condemnation, but the gracious gift that followed many trespasses resulted in a verdict of justification."** (Romans 5:15-16 EHV).

The **"gracious,"** undeserved, free **Gift** God gave us at Christmas was not some new toy or the latest and greatest "tech gadget." It was the priceless gift of forgiveness and eternal life; the proclamation of our **"justification"**—God declaring us "Innocent!" for the sake of His Son Jesus. This gift of His eternal Son, our Savior from sin, He wrapped in a package of human flesh and placed Him in a lowly manger inside a livestock barn. He may not look like the most impressive gift. This little babe, who would grow up to be a carpenter and traveling preacher, may not appear to be the biggest, shiniest, most eye-catching **gift** we've been given at Christmas. But make no mistake: Look past the manger to the cross and see the eternal love wrapped up in this gift. Look past the cross to the empty tomb and see the shining glory and the eternal value of this ultimate **Gift**; our glorified, risen and ascended Savior, Jesus, who has promised us, **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die"** (John 11:25-26 NKJV).

When we think of **gifts** at Christmas, we usually also think about giving gifts, not just receiving them. In fact, that's why I titled this **"Christmas Tradition" - Gift Giving!** As we grow older we eventually realize that what Jesus once said is true, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive"** (**Acts 20:35**). We especially want to give someone a **gift** to show our appreciation if they have given us a really great and thoughtful **gift**. Well, God has given us the greatest **Gift** of all times. How can we possibly show our appreciation? What **"gift"** could we give in return to God that could properly thank Him for His unimaginable grace toward us?

Well, the fact is there isn't one. There is no gift that we can give back to God that could sufficiently thank Him for giving us forgiveness and eternal life through the sacrifice of His one and only Son, Jesus. However, there is a **"gift"** that God desires from us above all things. It's not something that can be bought or sold. You can't even find it online! God wants our hearts! That is what He desires most from us! King David writes in Psalm 51, **"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite [repentant] heart -- These, O God, You will not despise"** (Psalm 51:17 NKJV).

The kind of hearts He wants from us are **"broken"** ones! A heart that has felt the weight and curse of its sin and has given up any reliance on its own righteousness or merit and throws itself completely and trustingly on the saving grace of God's perfect **"Gift,"** Jesus Christ.

"Unwrap" that gift every day! God tells us that His mercies are new to us every morning (**Lamentations 3:22-23**)! You get this **gift** every day, not just at Christmas! This **gift** is free! Enjoy it—eternally—and share this **"perfect gift"** (**James 1:17**) with others! Amen.