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## Christmas Is All About Receiving

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### **Text: Luke 2:10-11**

A headline in a Canadian Church publication proclaimed, “It’s all about giving—a Christmas Story.” The article relates the story of a little boy who was willing to forego his Christmas presents for a night so that a little girl could have hers at once.

The headline and the article got it wrong. Christmas is not “all about giving”; Christmas is about *receiving*.

What gives me the authority and the right to contradict the well-established opinion, expressed in the article and by popular wisdom, that Christmas is about giving? None other than the New Testament, the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, the 10th and 11th verses: “...the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord.’”

Listen to what the angel, God’s messenger, tells the shepherds: “To you is born...a Saviour.” The child which the angel proclaims was born “to you.” First to the shepherds, then to all the people of Israel, and finally to you and to me. God gives him to us so that we may receive him, take him home as our own and keep and protect him until he will give us his protection and eternal care.

This child, the Saviour, the Christ, is given to you and for you, and to me and for me. God gives him to us. When God gives to us, then we can do only one thing: RECEIVE! Since Christmas is about the birth of the Saviour, the Christ, Christmas cannot be about human giving, it is about God’s giving; and therefore must be about humans receiving God’s gift: God’s only Son.

Every manger scene I have ever had the pleasure to look at demonstrates the wrong notion of what Christmas is all about. One shepherd drags a sheep behind him, another carries a lamb on his shoulder: they are bringing them as gifts for the new-born baby in the manger. We also see the Wise Men bearing their treasure chests from

which they dispense to Jesus their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In this way the idea that Christmas is about human giving crept into the minds of people and is lodged there—even in the minds of Christians.

The New Testament tells us absolutely nothing about shepherds bringing gifts. Nor did the angel tell them to bring gifts. Besides, the shepherds were poor people who, in all likelihood, did not own the sheep they herded. Had they given away any members of the flock it would have cost them dearly.

The gifts of the Wise Men have prophetic meaning, pointing out that the Baby is of high royalty and has come to die and, most of all, is the fulfilment of a prophecy. Their gifts are therefore more symbolic than real.

Despite this we have developed the notion that we should not come empty-handed to the manger, but bring gifts. If we can't give gifts to the Christ Child, then we can and must give gifts to human beings. If you are too poor to bring a gift to the Christ Child, then, so a Christmas song, "The Little Drummer Boy," proclaims, you can at least bring your drumming. The little drummer boy stands there, beating his martial drum to delight the Baby Jesus. Another story tells of a poor Mexican child bringing a bouquet of weeds to the Christ Child, which then miraculously turns into a poinsettia.

Giving gifts on Christmas has become the thing to do. Mostly because it suits our human desires and wants so very well. What we desire and want is to be big, great and important, to have power and influence. There is hardly anything harder for an adult to do than to accept a gift gracefully when we have nothing to give, or can give nothing, in return, for that means that we are weak, poor and powerless.

There is another aspect to gifts which is quite insidious: what we receive is never quite the right thing. The gift is not what we hoped for or expected. It is not what we wanted, even though we didn't express any clear wish whatsoever.

I knew a woman who each year after Christmas went out to exchange the gifts she had received from her husband. She never once kept a Christmas present he had given her. They were never just right. Should she be surprised if her husband's gifts grow ever smaller, and are more and more carelessly selected?

This inability to accept gifts indicates a great human pride. We don't like to be in anyone's debt. If we receive a gift, and haven't given one to the giver, we rush out to buy one so that we should not be in his or her debt. We say "Thank you" and even write small notes, all in order to equalize human giving and receiving.

Small wonder, then, that we feel Christmas and the Christmas celebration must also be about human giving. But it isn't. For the angel said to the shepherds, "To you is born...a Saviour!" He, who was born, was born to you. God wants you to have him. God wants you to accept the benefits which God is giving through this baby boy. God gives, and you and I receive. If we don't receive him then we have no part of him, nor can we claim any of the benefits which he brings. Therefore, Christmas is about receiving Christ.

God sent his angel to the shepherds so that they should know his good news of the birth and have the great benefit which comes from having a Saviour. Two matters are to be observed here. First, the speaker is an angel. An angel is a messenger from God to transmit God's will and purpose to you and me. Such messengers may be human or heavenly. Without such messengers we cannot know God. For without such direct speech from the mouth of a messenger sent by God we have only our human imagination of what God could, or must, be. An angel, a messenger, proclaims the word which he or she has heard from the mouth of God. Therefore, it behooves us to listen to her or him very carefully and learn what is on God's mind.

That, then, is the second thing to be observed here: the angel's message. The angel says the newborn is a "Saviour, who is the Christ, the Lord." Let's unfold this saying from the back forwards. The child is "the Lord." This means nothing less than that God himself, who in the Old Testament is often called "Lord," has laid himself into the manger. God has come to earth in human form in order to become the Christ, the one Anointed to be a "Saviour" for you and for me. A Saviour is one who rescues from deadly peril, from the peril of falling into eternal death, of being eternally forgotten.

If you say, "No, that can't be, for God is a good and gracious God who would not reject or forget people," then listen to what the text says: he is given to you, he is a Saviour for you. If God says that you and I need a Saviour, then who are we to ignore this statement of God? If God says, "I give you a Saviour," then I say, "I need one." If you say, "You may need one, but not I," then it is clear that you are better informed as to your needs than God is.

This is what the angel says, "To you is born a Saviour, who is the Christ, the Lord." The Saviour, who has been laid into the manger by God, is given to us so that we may benefit by having him. For, as it is with all gifts, so it is with Christ. Gifts must be accepted and used in

order to bring the appropriate benefit to the recipient. If we leave a Christmas present in the box unwrapped and unused, then we may never have what it contains. As long as it remains wrapped up we have absolutely no benefit from it. We must unwrap the package, take the present out of its box, and use it. Then we obtain the benefit which we are supposed to have from it.

The same is true of the Saviour, who is the Christ, the Lord. As long as he lies there in the manger in a stable in Bethlehem, he does no one any good. But God has promised that God would give you salvation through him. Therefore, you and I must believe God's promise and accept God's gift, or else the precious gift of God lies there unused, unappreciated, and therefore rejected. Such non-action and unbelief are of course an offence to the giver, to God. God gave what was most precious; God gives and expects nothing in return than that we graciously accept God's gift and use it as God intended us to use it, and not stumble and fall because we have no appropriate gift to give God in return.

Here you can see why Jesus said, "Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God" and learn what God really meant by it, namely, that you have to set aside all your adult pride and self-sufficiency, your illusions about being a giver and provider and protector, and become as helpless as a little child who can do nothing but receive from others. Consider how dependent a little child is, how she depends on her mother for food and sustenance, and how she can do no more, and even nothing better, than to nurse and nurse and accept the gift which the mother provides. Without shame a baby accepts and takes and trusts. In her very early days and weeks she cannot even smile and so delight the mother's heart. So it is with the kingdom of God. We must become totally dependent upon another, Christ the Lord, the Saviour, whom God gives us. For when we come bearing gifts—our merits, goodness, or anything that we have on our own — our hands are too full to accept what God gives. We then remain what we are: people in need of a Saviour.

There is one more word in the angel's message we need to hear. "Be not afraid," the angel says. When God comes close and speaks to us, or even sends messengers, then it is natural that people become fearful. If we don't become fearful, then our God is too small. The shepherds were "sore afraid," as the King James Version expresses it so colourfully. Therefore, the words "be not afraid" express the kindness

and love which God has for us in his heart. God does not want us to fear his presence, does not want to scare us away but draw us to him. This is the reason God comes as a baby, and not as an adult. For what human being can resist a baby? We are biologically programmed to loves babies and take them into our arms and cuddle them. Christ the Lord, the Saviour, comes to us as a baby, non-threatening, totally harmless; and all he wants is that we receive him and take him into our lives.

This is the reason why Christmas, the Birth of Jesus the Christ, is not about giving, but about receiving. Receiving Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.