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Heavenly Father, thank you so much for the many wonderful gifts that you give to us. I thank you so much for the greatest gifts you gave to us, your son Jesus. We thank you for all the blessings that we have received here in this meeting house with these brothers and sisters around us with this place that we can come to be together to worship you. I ask as I speak now that you will open our ears to only hear what it is that you have for us to hear today. In Jesus name, Amen. Well, good morning. Merry Christmas. Today's Advent message is gifts. And I apologize, I'm fighting a cold. So I'll be doing that a lot. Today's message is gifts, God's gift. And I was just sitting here during quiet time thinking how that is the quietest quiet time we've ever had because there was no speakers humming or buzzing or I don't know if you noticed, but I noticed. And I'm so blessed and grateful for the gifts that we've received in these lights and these new sound systems. If someone like me and you notice those little things, it's a real blessing. So this is definitely a season of gifts. That's not something that even needs to be said. We're only two days away from Christmas. So of course you all have your shopping done, unlike me. We are a nation that loves to give and receive. I know that sometimes the word capitalism is said with some derision, but we are a capitalist country and that has taken us from pilgrims on a beach to the most powerful country in the world. And as such, as a nation that was built on capitalism, of course a holiday that's based around giving and receiving is going to be big. And this is definitely the biggest holiday of the year. We love to give and we love to receive gifts. And we love to give gifts to our children and to our friends and our loved ones because this is one of the forms of love. This is how we express love is through giving. And the reason that this is a form of love that we all have in common is because we were created in the image of God and our God is a God who expresses love through giving. And that brings me to my first point, which is God gives us many gifts. James 1, verse 17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." See, he is a God who created us to love us. He created us for a reason. And it wasn't just out of boredom and it wasn't just as an interesting experiment. He created us to love us and he wanted us to love him and be in relationship with him. And so even though we've sinned and been separated from God, he still loves to give us things. And I'm going to talk about a theological concept this morning and I'm going to keep it brief in case you didn't get your caffeine. But the concept is called the Doctrine of Common Grace. And common meaning available to everyone and grace meaning an undeserved gift. And it's based on a verse in Matthew, chapter 5, verse 45, which is the Sermon on the Mount. And it says, "For he makes he being God, for he makes his son rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." You see, even though we're all sinners and deserve death for what we've done, God continues to put the sun in the sky and the rain over our fields. He puts breath in our lungs. He gives us warm and cold and summer and winter. He continues to give us these good things to the whole world. And that's the idea of common grace is that everybody, no matter where they stand with God right now, is still the recipient of some good thing from God. So why does God do this? Well, because he's indescribably good. I mean, for us, when we talk about a good person, that person probably is nice to their friends and visits their relatives on holidays. And tries not to harm or treat anyone unjustly, that's our definition of good. But God is so good that he is good even to bad people and wicked people. And for us, if we met someone who loved their enemies, that's kind of outside the concept of what we would call good. We would say that's exceedingly, extraordinarily good. And yet, of course, since that is who our God is and what he is like, that's what we have been called to emulate. He does it in order to woo us. Romans 2.4 says, "The goodness of God leads you to repentance." That's why he's good to us. That's why he gives gifts to lead us to repentance. He wants everyone to come into, to be reestablished and have that relationship with him through his son, Jesus. And that's my second point. Jesus is God's greatest gift. John 3.16, of course, we all know, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." It's referred to as a gift. Salvation is referred to as a gift because it's something that we didn't have and something that we couldn't get on our own. And something that, because of that, God had to simply give to us. Romans 3.23 reminds us that all have sinned and fallen short of glory to God, meaning that there was no one who had the salvation. No one could get it on their own. And Ephesians 2.1 says, "You were dead and your trespasses and sins." Which means, just as a dead person cannot raise themself back to life, we, the spiritually dead people, could not bring ourselves back to spiritual life. We didn't have it and we couldn't get it, but it was a gift from God. And that's the big picture, which is real important to learn, because you're going to need to repeat it to the people in this world, is that Jesus is Emmanuel. He is God with us. He came here to be and to re-establish God with us. He came here on the mission to save us. When little kids talk about their presents, when you ask them, "What did you get for Christmas?" It's real easy to figure out what their favorite presents are, isn't it? In fact, you probably don't even have to ask, because they're not even playing with the thing they love the most. They're just telling you and talking about the thing they love the most, because they love it so much, they're excited about it. And we're the same. We are people who are driven by our passions. We get excited about certain things, and what we're excited about causes us to pursue our careers and our hobbies and our interests and the people we love. And we are a desire, excitement-driven people. Your life, the things you do and the things you say, will convey to the world your perceived value of Christ. Do you talk about Jesus the way you talked about your best Christmas present? Because it's easy for us as Christians to say, "What's the greatest gift?" "The greatest gift is Jesus." Yep, that's right, we nod and smile. But do we actually live it out, and do we actually behave that way? Is He really the greatest thing in our life? If you're the kind of person who, as soon as something goes wrong, you're on your knees in prayer, and as soon as you have a decision to make, you flip open your Bible to see what the Bible says. If you're the kind of person who gets some extra money and you think, "How can I bless someone with this?" Then there's a good bet that Jesus is that most valuable thing. If everything else in your life comes through the filter of Jesus and His importance to you, then He is your most valuable thing. And Carmel needs more people like that. Carmel needs people who don't honk and flip gestures when they get cut off in traffic. Carmel needs people who say, "After you, and here, let me help you." And especially, Carmel needs people who say, "Can I pray for you?" That's because people need more prayer. But if you're a Sunday morning Christian, if the extent of your Christianity is that you go to a church and the rest of your life in no way conveys any interest in God or pursuing His kingdom, then I'm worried for you. I'm really worried for you because that's a very weak faith, if not a dead faith. Our third point is that you need to believe on God's greatest gift if you haven't. Acts 4, verse 12 says, "Nor is there salvation, and any other, for there is no other name under heaven, given among men by which we must be saved." Jesus also said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." You see, whatever you think of Jesus, if you believe that Jesus could tell lies, then there's nothing I can really do to help you. But if you believe that He was a good person and He spoke the truth, then at some point you're going to have to deal with the fact that He says, "No one can come to the Father but through Me." Romans 10, 9 says that if you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth, then you will be saved. Salvation is not earned. It's not punching a card at church every week. It's not doing certain services. It's not a certain amount of giving. You're not going to get to heaven and God's not going to open up a ledger to look at all of your income to make sure 10% of it got donated. It's not going to work like that. It's believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. But it has to be real belief. You see, if I told you the world was ending, let's say, on December 21st, if you stockpiled food and water and built a bunker in your yard, then that's real belief. Most of the people I know didn't believe that. The few that did still didn't really act like it. They didn't stockpile food and water. Most of them just threw parties. This highlights the difference between real belief and passing belief. Real belief is going to change your life. Real belief is going to affect you and you're going to be different because of it. Some of you may be saying, "Well, you're just kind of doing it. Some people say you have to act a certain way to be saved and you're saying that you have to believe enough that you act a certain way. It's the same thing." Well, no, it's not because the actions themselves don't save you. Your behavior doesn't save you, but a belief that affects your behavior saves you. A belief that's strong enough. A faith that's true enough. I'm going to flip over to James chapter 2 and this passage is a little long, but it's worth reading. James chapter 2, starting at verse 14. "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food and one of you says to him, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled, but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?' Thus also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith without your works and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe and tremble.' But do you want to know, oh foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works and by works faith was made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness, and he was called the friend of God.' You see then that a man is justified by works, not by faith only." If you've ever read through Revelations, which I know it's kind of a daunting thing to try and do, but early on there are seven letters written from Jesus to seven churches and every single one of those letters says, 'I know your works.' Jesus isn't saying, 'I know your works and you've done enough to enter the kingdom of heaven.' Jesus is saying, 'I know your works and that's how I know what kind of faith you have.' You believe in your heart and you confess with your mouth, but it's not just something that happens one time at summer camp. It's something that needs to happen every moment of every day the rest of your life. You need to be constantly in the state of believing that it's actually true, life changing belief. And that goes on forever and that leads me to my last point. You need to carry this gift into the rest of the world. Matthew chapter five verse 16 says, 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.' A few chapters later in Matthew 28 there's a verse known as the Great Commission. Matthew 28 verse 19 says, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.' Both of these phrases were uttered by Jesus. And if Jesus is your Lord, then He was speaking to you and you need to obey them. You need to carry your light and this good news out into the world. And it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to be a preacher or a missionary, but your life needs to shine with the light of Christ. Your speech needs to be seasoned with the words of Christ, about Christ. If all the people in the world were dying of a plague and you had received a vaccine for that plague, and not only did that vaccine cure you, but it caused your breath, anyone you breathed on, to become cured, wouldn't you feel some obligation to just start breathing on people? Now, where this metaphor kind of breaks down is that even though we are living in a world of dying people, a lot of the people don't realize that they're spiritually dead and a lot of them reject the cure. But that doesn't mean that we stop trying to save people because their death is real. We should want to share this good news, but even if you kind of don't feel like it, we are also commanded to by Jesus. So practice it, work on it. And like I said, you don't have to bash people over the head with a Bible. The goal, Jesus did not command you to say certain churchy phrases in every conversation. Jesus commanded you to lead people to Him. And sometimes to lead people to Him is not done by words. Sometimes it's done by your lifestyle. Most of the time it's done by your lifestyle. But at that moment where they wonder why you're so different, make sure that Jesus gets the credit. I know so many times in my own life, and I've seen it happen to other people, we do these wonderful acts of service. We do these incredibly nice things for people. And then we say, "Yep, see ya." And Jesus never gets the credit for the good things we do. And we need to... There needs to be both sides of that coin there. We need to demonstrate God's love, but we also need to make sure that God gets the credit for it. I had this crazy idea. I thought, what if we replaced the phrase, "You're welcome with Jesus loves you." I mean, how many times are you thanked throughout the day for being Christ-like, for opening the door for someone, or for carrying something in for someone. And someone says, "Thank you." And you just say, "You're welcome." What if it was you hold the door and they say, "Thank you." And you say, "Jesus loves you." Or you carry something, "Thank you. Jesus loves you." What if every good thing, rather than saying, "You're welcome," basically takes the credit yourself. So what if instead of saying, "You're welcome," and taking that credit, you pass it on to Jesus and say, "Just say, 'Jesus loves you.'" How much would that affect people's lives? Suddenly, every good thing you do is not something that you're doing. It's something you're just an ambassador for Christ doing on his behalf. How much more effective would your own evangelist lifestyle be, just by replacing that one phrase, "Jesus loves you," instead of, "You're welcome." God gives us many good gifts, but the greatest gift was that of his Son. Believe in him and you will be saved. Once you're saved, take this gift out into the world. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the many good things you have given us, but more than anything, we praise you and we glorify you for the greatest gift, which was your Son, Jesus, who lived life that we couldn't live and yet died the death that we deserve to die. It is a beautiful, wonderful thing, and we are humbled and we are awed, and we owe you more than we could ever give. And so we commit to you right now that for the rest of our lives, we will continue to shine your light into this world, and as we do so, we will give you the glory. We will reflect that back to you. I pray that you watch over each of my friends during this holiday season as we travel, as we go about our business. I pray that you keep us all safe, but I also pray that you open our eyes to the opportunities that we have in order to further your kingdom, to bring more people into your family, to bring more of our friends and our neighbors into eternity with you. And I ask this all in Jesus' name, Amen.