



Christmas Notes

Part 5 – Our Finest Gifts We bring

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We're wrapping up our Christmas series called *Christmas Notes*. The title of today's message is *Our Finest Gifts We Bring*, as we wrap up Christmas from our celebration from last week. I hope y'all had a great celebration with family. We look to this week to celebrate New Year's. New Year's is interesting to me. I've never really understood what we're celebrating at New Year's. All I can think of is that for the next few weeks, when we write the date, we're going to put the wrong year until we finally get it figured out and our checks all read the right year.

The thing that New Year's does kind of serve as is a finish line for Christmas season. It's kind of this time where we're finally like, *Okay, we really do need to take down our Christmas decorations and the lights and get rid of the tree and change our radio stations back to the regular music.* As that happens though, we kind of seem to come down off of this Christmas high, this intoxication that comes along with the season and all of this excitement that is around Christmas.

That makes it hard if you have a birthday around Christmas. Does anybody else know what I'm talking about? My birthday is just right after Christmas; it's in the first part of January. Those of you that have a birthday around Christmas, you get it, you understand the struggle. The rest of you don't. I'm going to come to one of your birthday parties in the middle of July and I'm going to give you a present and I'm going to say, "By the way, this is for Christmas too." It doesn't make sense. The combined Christmas and birthday presents don't make sense. I'm not bitter. It's okay; I've gotten over it. Nothing a little therapy couldn't help.

As we come down off this Christmas high, there are a lot of things that go away. There are a lot of fads that seem to come with the Christmas season and then quickly go away again. It's like Christmas is this one big bundle of fads that go away. We've seen fads outside of Christmas, things that come and go. You've seen things that maybe were around for a while and then are not around anymore. Things that people are doing or things that are popular that no one is doing anymore.

Other things that are around that have been really, really popular and we thought, *Man this is never going to go away; people are going to be doing this forever.* The fact is that it runs its course. Then there are some things that have been around for a while that frankly we all just think need to go away because we've all had enough.

There are some things like that around Christmas time that we're ready to see go too. Like ugly Christmas sweaters. We've had enough; they can go to the back of the closet again until next year. How about Hallmark Christmas movies? I don't know why you're applauding, good or bad, but we'll see you next year. Bye, bye... they're gone. We're done for the year. Christmas shopping. I don't like shopping in general. I kind of like Christmas shopping because I get to buy gifts for my family, but I certainly don't love it. I know I don't love it because scripture says love is patient. I'm anything but patient when I'm Christmas shopping and the line is wrapped around the store.

So, you see, there are things that go away with Christmas like a fad. But there are some things that we would like to see stay after Christmas. During the Christmas season, everybody's talking about Jesus. That's a trend we'd like to see hang around. Everybody seems to talk about Jesus, even those celebrities and otherwise that, during the rest of the year, denounce him by their lifestyle or they even reject him with their words; they're speaking about Jesus. We even have these phrases like *Jesus is the reason for the season*. Even people that may not speak of him the rest of the year.

The question for the Christian is this: Around Christmas season, with all the fads and the trends and everything else, is Jesus the reason for the season for you. Now I want to ask you a harder question, Christians. Is your focus on an acknowledgement of Jesus during the rest of the year at a level low enough where it leaves room for improvement around the Christmas season? Ouch. That kind of hurts. But it's a question that we should ask. We need to examine ourselves in this. For the Christian, Jesus should be the reason for every season. There is not a specific season for Jesus.

Let's talk about these special days. We just celebrated one – Christmas. And we have these days where we focus on certain things. Around Christmas time, we focus on that Christ was born. So, we celebrate these special days, but here's the thing about Christmas. Jesus never said, "I want you to celebrate my miracle birth. I want you to set aside a season, at the end of the calendar year, and celebrate my miracle birth." He didn't say that. In fact, he said, "I want you to remember by death, burial, and my resurrection." But even with that, he didn't say, "Set aside a Sunday in the spring for a special service where you acknowledge that." He said, "Do it often." Do it all the time. Always acknowledging Jesus for his sacrifice, for his death, his burial, and his resurrection.

Now, before you get carried away and say, "Brawner's a Scrooge and he doesn't think we should celebrate Christmas," that's not the case. I love Christmas and I love celebrating Christmas. We celebrate Christmas in our home. As a matter of fact, I want to show you a couple of things to prove it, so you don't think I'm a Grinch. This is our Christmas story from this year. Here's the first one. This was a new tradition in our home this year. I call it a tradition. We'll see if it sticks next year. This was the first year for it. We went out and we cut down our own Christmas tree. Yes, I overestimated the height of my living room ceiling. We had to trim it and we made it work. It was, in fact, a little full, with a lot of sap. Then we have the next one. On Christmas day, I gave my family the jewel of all Christmas gifts: a puppy. See, I'm not a Grinch, okay?

I love Christmas. I think it's great. I think we should celebrate special days. I do not think our focus on and acknowledgement of Jesus the rest of the year should be low enough where there is room for

improvement on these special days. For the Christian, we should be up here all the time. Jesus is the reason for every season.

As we talk about how Jesus is the reason for every season, I want to focus on a particular group from the Christmas story: the wise men. I want to talk about the wise men because this was a group that focused on Jesus long after Jesus was born. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Long after everyone there had put away their Christmas tree and taken down their lights, they were focused on Jesus on a level up here, ongoing.

We learn about the wise men in Matthew 2. ***1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, 2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*** Now, I'm going to pause here and we're going to jump forward a little bit. I'm going to skip over a part of this story, the part about King Herod. Frankly, King Herod is just like the poopy pants of this part of the story. So, we're going to put him aside. We're not concerned about what he was doing. I'm more concerned about what the wise men were doing. We're going to pick up the rest of this story in Verse 9.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. 11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

I want to make a few observations about the wise men that we are focusing on this morning. The first observation is that we don't know how many there were. You're like, "Yeah we do; there were three." Because there is a song about three wise men, right? No. Scripture says there were wise men. We know that there were more than one because it was plural. Most scholars suggest that it was actually probably closer to about a dozen of these wise men that came to see Jesus and give him gifts.

Probably the reason we say there were three wise men is because there were three types of gifts that they brought. That's the other important observation. There were three types of gifts. We don't know that they brought three gifts. What we're seeing here is that actually there were probably about a dozen of these wise men and some suggest they even brought an entire caravan of treasures with them. We don't know for sure, but that's probably more accurate than three wise men bringing three gifts. The other observation is one that we've already made and that's that the wise men came later. Christ was born and then they sought after him. It took them a couple of years to get to him. As a matter of fact, Jesus was probably between the age of one and two when they got there.

So, they get there and they're giving Jesus, in his infancy here or as a toddler, these gifts. One thing we can assume then is that Jesus wasn't at all interested in the actual gifts that they brought, but rather in the boxes that they came in. What's up with that? It's all empty boxes on Amazon next year. That's what we're doing. By the way, when the wise men gave Jesus these gifts, it was the only time in history that it's ever been appropriate to give a combined birthday and Christmas present.

The wise men were seeking after Jesus to worship him. Their primary objective was to worship him, and they did so by being generous with him. They expressed generosity as an act of worship to Jesus as they brought these gifts to him. That's what we're talking about this morning: bringing our finest gifts to the Lord through our generosity. Because, you see, it's December 30th and Christmas is over and this generosity is one of those things that tends to fade away. We tend to see less generosity once the Christmas season is done.

Now, as we talk about generosity, it's first important to talk about something else and that's gratitude. We remember that the heart is the wellspring of life and everything we do and everything we say flows from it. We know that generosity comes from a heart of gratitude. We can talk about generosity and we can give you practical applications of generosity – how you should be generous, and we could even shame you into it – but what good is that? That's like insisting that a child apologize to their sibling. You've been there before, right? "You apologize to your sister!" "Okay, I'm sorry!" "Good, I'm glad we cleared the air here."

You see, a genuine apology comes from a heart of remorse. In the same way, authentic generosity naturally flows from a heart of gratitude. So, it's important for us to talk about gratitude. The thing for the Christians is that we should inherently be grateful. We should inherently have gratitude in our heart because of what we've received from a holy God who cannot tolerate even the presence of sin yet gave his son to die for our sins so that we can be in his presence. So, we should be literally eternally grateful for what the Lord has done for us, producing in us a heart of gratitude from which authentic generosity naturally flows. Authentic generosity naturally flows from a heart of gratitude.

Charles Stanley said it this way: "Salvation is the greatest gift believers have received and should continually motivate us to a lifestyle of gratitude." Then that gratitude naturally produces a wellspring of a life of generosity flowing from us.

We know that generosity should naturally flow from the Christian out of a heart of gratitude, but we are also given commandments in scripture to be generous. As a matter of fact, Jesus said, in Mark 12: 31, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." As a matter of fact, he said that this is the second most important commandment that there is. The first is love the Lord your God and the second is love your neighbor as yourself.

One of the ways we express generosity is in the way that we handle money. As a matter of fact, that may be the first thing that you think of when we talk about generosity. We're going to talk about that for a little bit this morning. It's not the only way we express generosity, but it's one way and it's one we commonly think about.

I want to share with you something from our family that we call our Guidelines for Handling Money. First, I want to disclaim any notion that we think we have it perfect or have it all together or that we have all the answers. This is something that my wife and I have put together over a couple of decades now of marriage and raising kids and studying scripture and learning about how God desires for us to handle money.

We put these guidelines together that we use to teach our kids about how to handle money. This hangs next to our kitchen on a little magnet board. Whenever a discussion of money comes up, we get it out and we talk about it.

It's a five-point guideline and the first point is this: **Money comes from work.** Work comes from the Lord, but if we want money, we go to work. Proverbs 6: 6 says, ***Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider its ways and be wise.*** So, we understand that money comes from work. When our kids get money, it's from doing work. We give them earnings; we don't give them an allowance because we believe they should work for their money.

Now, as they are getting older, they're getting some checks from some outside jobs, so they get their money and they bring it home and we acknowledge that they have worked to earn their money. Then we do four things, the other four points. We do four things with money once we earn it. It's an orderly fashion that we do it in. With the kids, when they get their earnings, we get out these jars that are labeled. We talk about each of them.

The first thing you do when you work and earn money is **you give back to God.** This is a sacrificial acknowledgement that everything that we have comes from him. This is our first fruits, our finest gifts we bring. In our family, we adhere to the tithe. Tithe translates to tenth or 10% off the top of what you make. There's no New Testament guide as to how much or what percent you should give, so we use the Old Testament tradition of giving a tithe. The way we do that is giving to our home church by way of 10% of our income.

The second thing we do with money, after we've earned it and we've given back to God, is **we save.** Proverbs 21: 20 says, ***Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it.*** So, we understand that it's important for us to save some of the money that we earn, after we have given back to God.

The third thing that we do is we **generously meet the needs of others**, those who have need. That comes from Mark 12: 31 – ***You shall love your neighbor as yourself.***

Then the fourth and last thing that we are able to do is **spend.** That comes from Ecclesiastes 9: 7 – ***Go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart for God has already approved what you do.***

So, we talk to our kids about how if we work to earn money and we've done all of the other things that we're supposed to do out of a heart of gratitude, with our heart in the right place, then we can do and have some things that are kind of fun.

A few years ago, we were on a vacation and we talked to our kids on vacation about how this is the last thing that we can do with money. We can eat our bread with joy and drink our wine with a merry heart because we've taken care of everything else and our heart is in the right place and the Lord has blessed us to do and have some things.

We are on vacation and we're at this restaurant, sitting around the table. The restaurant had like a self-serve ice cream bar. It was crowded, and we were all quiet, eating our ice cream at our table. Our daughter, Kaylin, who was six years old at the time, raises her ice cream and says loudly for everyone to hear, "Daddy, we're drinking our wine with a merry heart." I said, "Sweetheart, we sure are."

It's interesting because as we go through those things with our kids, they get hung up on the same things that we get hung up on. I believe that most of us get hung up on, when it comes to the generosity jar, the question of how much should I put in this? We have numbers for the other jars that we generally go by. "Dad, how much should I put in this?" Like any parent that wants to frustrate their child into having to think about something, I answered her question with a question. "Well, how much do you think you should put in?"

To dig into that a little bit more, we look at 2 Corinthians 9: 7, which says, ***Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*** There's the answer. How much should you put in? You should put how much you've decided in your own heart. The important thing is not what you give, but how you give. The thing is from a heart of gratitude pours out generosity. What we learn from this is that generous is an attitude, it's not a number.

You may say, "Well, that's good because I don't have a big number to deal with, so a lot of this doesn't really apply to me." Well, let's look at what Luke 16 says. ***10 "The one who is faithful in very little is also faithful in much, and the one who is dishonest in very little is also dishonest in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?"*** So, the question is how are you handling what God has entrusted to you? Are you faithful with what you have? And are you able to be entrusted with true riches? Do you want to be entrusted with true riches? What are true riches? Does that mean if I'm responsible and I'm good with a five-figure income, God will move me to a six-figure income or beyond? Is that what true riches are? Do I want true riches? I've also heard from scripture that rich is a bad thing.

Let's look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 19. ***23 And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I say to you that with difficulty a rich person will enter into the kingdom of heaven! 24 And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person into the kingdom of God."*** So, do I really want true riches? Do I want to be rich? It sounds like it's a bad thing to me.

But as I study scripture more, I read on in Ephesians 2: 4 that God is rich. He's rich in mercy. We also read in Proverbs 10: 22 that the blessings of the Lord makes you rich and he will not add sorrow with it. With what I'm reading there, maybe this rich can be a good thing. We're seeing that rich can be good or bad. You can have good rich and you can have bad rich.

With the bad rich, I think it's really important for us to understand what bad rich is, according to what scripture says. I like James 5. It gives us the most comprehensive description of what it is to be rich in a bad way, according to scripture. I want to go through this with four points that James outlines for us what it is to be rich in a bad way.

According to scripture, the first is that the bad rich **don't pay their laborers**. This would mean that you received goods or services that you owe someone for that you don't pay them. This is any capacity to any number. That's a characteristic of a bad rich person.

Next is **indulgent while ignoring the needs of others**. The phrase that James uses here is self-indulgence. We have to be careful because what we can start to get carried away with is to say just no indulgence then. I shouldn't have or do any nice things because I don't want to be self-indulgent.

The thing is we've got to remember what Ecclesiastes 5: 19 says also. ***19 God has also given riches and wealth to every man, and He has allowed him to enjoy them, take his reward, and rejoice in his labor. This is a gift of God...*** So, you see, doing and having nice things is okay according to Ecclesiastes 5: 19. This is a great example of why we don't study a Bible verse; we study the Bible. We study the Bible comprehensively because we can cherry pick scriptures and we can misinterpret things. On the other side of that coin, I could read Ecclesiastes 5: 19 and say everything the Lord gives me is for me to enjoy. But, according to James 5, I understand that I shouldn't be self-indulgent, ignoring the needs of others.

Next is that they **fatten their hearts**. Bad rich fatten their hearts. The picture here is that of gluttony, gluttony of the heart or as I like to say junk food for the soul. What is junk food for the soul? Anger, bitterness, wrath, pornography, gossip, all of these things are junk food for our souls.

Next is that they **use their power unjustly**. You may say, "I don't have any power anyway. I don't have any authority over anybody. How can I use it unjustly?" I would suggest that we all have some authority over some people, somehow. If you're a parent, you have authority over your children. Or even a child over a dependent parent that you're now caring for. Obviously, the employers that have employees. How about co-workers? Co-workers rely on you to do their job. You have power over them in that way. The bad rich person uses their power unjustly.

As we look at what James has outlined for us, we see the bad rich person is the person for whom it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for them to enter the kingdom of heaven. It has nothing to do with a number here. As a matter of fact, you see that none of these require you to have a dollar to your name. So, there is good rich and there is bad rich. We understand then that rich is a condition, it's not a number. And it can be good or bad.

Greg Koukl, in his book *The Story of Reality*, said the divide for Jesus was not between rich and poor, speaking of wealth, but he said rather, the divide was between pride and repentance. As with everything else, Jesus is more concerned about the condition of our hearts. Do we have a heart of gratitude from which generosity flows?

Let's look at our example in the Christmas story this morning, the subjects of our study of the wise men. As a matter of fact, these guys were rich. They were financially rich. They had a lot of wealth. They were like private jet wealthy, which I'm sure they would have appreciated considering they went about a thousand miles on the back of a camel. They had wealth, but their hearts... Look at their hearts. They sought to worship the Lord, leaving everything behind and going to seek him out to bring him their treasures. That's the heart of the wise men. Rich is a condition of the heart. They were rich in both

ways. What we may overlook is that they gave of their treasures, they gave of their possessions to Jesus, but something else they gave was their time. They were generous with their time. Think about it. It took them almost a couple of years to get there and they were clearly busy people in their wealth, leaving everything behind. They left the comfort of their home behind to seek out Jesus. What we are starting to see then is that generosity has many currencies, not just money.

I grew up watching probably one of the most generous people that I know of – my dad, Jim Brawner. If you know Jim Brawner and a lot of you do, you know there is no one that Jim Brawner didn't ever have time for. Jim Brawner is always giving of himself in his service, even in labor if needed. He loves giving of his knowledge and sharing with people and educating people in a way that can make their lives better from it. Probably the one that's most abundant is his giving of his kindness. Kindness just flows from him in generosity. Generosity has many currencies.

I have a friend named Phoenix Tucker, who happens to be my barber also. Phoenix is skilled in many different trades. One of them is auto mechanics. I know of at least one situation where Phoenix did some mechanic work for a single mom who wouldn't have been able to afford it otherwise. Phoenix was pouring out generosity in his time and in his skills. Generosity has many currencies.

We have teachers and school administrators that we hear stories about taking care of the needs of their students and their families, usually doing it in an unseen fashion. There are other groups and other people that do this. That's the thing. It usually goes unseen. We don't see it, we don't know it's happening. That's usually how folks expressing generosity in these currencies desire it. They want it to go unseen. When they do that and it goes unseen, they're letting their light shine before others.

Let's look at Matthew 5. **14 "You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.** You see, the purpose of your light shining for others to see is so that people can see your good works and your acts of generosity. Generosity has many different currencies and those currencies all come out in our good works. What is the purpose of our good works? It's not so that people can see us and the works that we're doing. It's so that people can see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

I want to talk about this concept of light here for a minute. We read that you are the light of the world and that a city on a hill cannot be hidden and that we should let our light shine before others so that others may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. So, as we talk about light, I want to see if we can get the house lights down for a minute.

I'm going to turn on this light and I'm going to try not to blind anyone. I want you to look here at this light as I move it around. This light is not for the purpose of you looking at it because that's uncomfortable. As a matter of fact, if you look right at it while I shine the bright part right in your eyes, it would even hurt. That's not the purpose that it serves. A bright light is not for the purpose of people looking at. A bright light is so that people can see that which it is illuminating.

Our good works are not so that people can see us. Our good works are so that people will see them, and it will give glory to our Father in heaven. Our light is to shine before others so that people may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

Let's look at Ephesians 2. ***10 For we are His creation—created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them.*** I love this verse because it answers one of the most common and deep, existential questions about why we are here, why we exist, why God created us. We were created in Christ Jesus for good works. You were created for good works. What's the purpose of those good works? So that people may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

As we close this morning, let's remember, Christians, that there is no season for focusing on and acknowledging Jesus, for talking about Jesus. And that there is no season for gratitude. We, as Christians who have received grace and mercy from a holy God, should be forever eternally grateful. May we let that gratitude produce from us generosity that we express in many different currencies. As those currencies come out through our good works, we let our light shine before others not so that people can see us, not so that they can see our good works, but so that they can see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Our good works are not for people to look at us, they are for people see that which we are illuminating.

Father, we love you. Lord, we are thankful for this Christmas season and this special day that we get to acknowledge. I pray that as we go from here, we would remember the sacrifice of Jesus, the gift that you gave us so that we can be in the presence of a holy God, eternally. Lord, may you fill us with your Holy Spirit, with gratitude, so that a wellspring of generosity may flow from each and every one of us through our good works. May people see our good works and give glory to you, Father, in heaven.

Bless each family here. Keep us safe. Lord, may we look to glorify you in all that we do. It's in the name of Jesus that we pray, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.