

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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## ***What To Give a People Who Already Have Everything***

*Isaiah 49.1-6; 1 Corinthians 1.1-9*

Russ Dean, January 20, 2008

Maybe this is a sermon I should have preached in the month prior to Christmas, when we were out frantically zinging from store to never-ending store, checking off everyone on our list. But this introduction is framed by the equally frantic work that took place in the Dean house this week, as we tried to find a place to put all of those much-needed Christmas presents we hauled home from South Carolina a month ago. I don't know where Amy stuffed it all, because, truth be told, there are some things we got last Christmas that still haven't been opened!

Now, I'm not a Grinch when it comes to Christmas. I don't mind spending money on gifts. In the grand scheme of things, even as overly materialistic as we've become in our society, at least Christmas causes us to think about spending money – for someone else, for a change! I'm not a Grinch. But much of what we do at Christmas really is just ridiculous.

You know what I mean. We go through the mall, and we look up and down our list, and we're not buying for Uncle Bob, genuinely, because there is something there that he really needs, nor something there that I really want to give him. We're buying (can we be honest about it?) – just because Uncle Bob is on our list! If Uncle Bob really needed that nifty little outdoor weather station you just found in the impulse aisle at Brookstone's, well... you wouldn't have just found it in the impulse aisle at Brookstone's!

I don't mind spending, even a little too much money, on a gift genuinely needed and individually chosen, but so much of our out-of-control spending is on unnecessary junk that we

buy at ungodly prices. Retailers are well aware of this. So, many of them have started, of necessity, advertising gifts “for the man/woman who has everything.” This mentality drives our materialistic frenzy. Most of us, literally, have every single thing we need. (Think about that just a moment...) So the biggest need in American industry these days is the race to create new stuff, whether useful or not, and the quest to wrap it in just the right advertising to convince us we simply can't live another week without one.

And high end retailers are packaging the most common items in the most absurd tinsel, and finding there is virtually no limit to what we will pay. I read this week of an experiment designed to test the effect of price – that is, perceived value – on actual experience. Researchers proved that the cost of an item, biases our brain's actual experience of that item. Wine, packaged at a higher price was chosen by experienced wine tasters as the better wine, over the same exact product in a cheaper bottle.

American consumers are an endless supply of disposable cash – and sometimes we even have more money than brains. Neiman Marcus, famous for its opulent waste, produces an annual Christmas list for the rich and famously stupid. Many of their items are found listed on your bulletin. In addition to these, last year's list included a \$139,000 BMW, a \$100,000 back yard water park, and a \$1.7 million “galactic charter to space,” which you can top off with a meal with real-live billionaire Richard Branson.

We should be ashamed of our gratuitous consumption. The truth is, though, I think we are all so consumed by it, so immersed in it, that we cannot see the immorality of it. One day, if humanity survives long enough, future generations will look back on our squandering materialism and will find us as infantile and backward as we view the mythic “Cave Man.”

God forgive us that we can ask the question, even a little tongue-in-cheek: What Do We Give a Person Who Has Everything?

But as I read scripture, I'm wondering if God is not in a similar fix. If God is not just as gratuitously spiritualistic as we have become hopelessly materialistic. If God is not asking, Christmas to Christmas, which is – as I hope you will understand my saying – every single day, “What shall I give them, now!?” “What more could there possibly be – they've already got every single thing they need!?”

Christmas was just four weeks ago. We're living in its aftermath. Paying the bills. Putting away the chaos. And just now trying to figure out what to do with all that stuff we were given. It's not much different than the place we find ourselves after Christmas, as we view our lives spiritually. It is still the season of Epiphany, the season of light. The light that came, originally, to those Magi who sought the “star in the East.” The light they found, as Amy reminded us several weeks ago, was not found in the expected place, but when they uncovered “God with us” in the most unexpected of ways, the experience sent them home, changed. Home, by the light of a different way.

Paul says to the fledgling church at Corinth, in effect, “Christmas has come, and now Epiphany, too! The light has shined... *‘for in every way you have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every (single) kind...’* God has already given you every thing you need; you are *not lacking in any spiritual gift...* So, what are you going to do with all the stuff?”

The “you” of Paul's letter is plural: you, the Church. And if it could have been said of that first century Mediterranean gathering of Jesus-followers, how much more is it true of you,

Park Road Baptist Church? Every single thing you need. Taken collectively, we have been given every resource there is: we have skills of every kind, from blue collar expertise, to white-collar experience, teaching and preaching, healing and hope, faith and a willing spirit. This congregation is even richly blessed with all the financial resources we need, to do everything we can dream. This spiritual gift is called generosity – and despite the fact that it sometimes has to be beaten out of you in December (!) – you’ve even got it!

Every single thing we need. What, then, should God, could God, would God possibly give us, next?

You know what it’s like to get a Christmas present that you can’t use? Not because it doesn’t work... Not because you don’t like it or want it... but because it’s the wrong season? A few years ago when my wife lost all her marbles (and her scruples along with them) and fell headlong into the sin of conspicuous consumption I’ve just been speaking of, and that Harley Davidson showed up on the front sidewalk... it was 25 degrees! It was like taking candy from a baby, putting a filet mignon just outside the dog pen. I couldn’t use it! I could hardly ride it down the driveway and back it was so cold.

The only thing worse than having every single thing – is having it... and not using it.

So, God, who is the best giver there ever was, has taken care of that, too. You’ve been given the gift of teaching? You won’t have to look far for students. The gift of healing? Whether through a surgeon’s hands or the listening ear of a friend, I promise you, you can find someone today who is limping, wounded, in need of your caring touch. The gift of generosity? As the old preacher said it, “You can’t out-give God!” Whatever your gift... God has also put you in a

world that is filled with the need for that particular gift – a world that is in need of what you alone may be able to give. My college roommate Kyle Matthews sings, “The thought that’s haunting me is someone, indeed, might be praying a prayer that even I could answer.”<sup>1</sup>

No worse a theology has ever been promulgated upon the Christian faith than John Calvin’s heresy which he called “the depravity of man.” Now, I do believe it is possible for us to “*think too highly of ourselves*” (Romans 12), as Paul warned, but no one in the sound of my hearing needs to be told how wretched you are from the inside out. We have enough of a tendency to bludgeon ourselves – the last thing we need is to hear it pronounced as “doctrine” from the pulpits of the Church. The more I read scripture, the more I am convinced that Calvin’s emphasis was exactly the opposite it should be. The Church needs to remind its members, daily, of the light that is within each of us (we know too well our own darkness), of the many gifts we have received at the hand of God, of our immeasurable worth as children of God.<sup>2</sup> Our scripture calls Jesus the “*light of the world*” (John 8.12), and the Church continues to affirm this belief. He is. But Jesus calls us “*the light of the world*” (Matthew 5.14). And he charges us all, in no uncertain terms, to “*let that light shine...*” (Matthew 5.16).

What more could God possibly give us? We have the gifts. And we have a world, an entire world, in which to put them to use!

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle Matthews, “Praying a Prayer.”

<sup>2</sup> “George Fox (the founder of the Quaker movement) preached the Good News that we are all children of God and that, as children of God, we have inherited powers from God. Each of us is given a measure of this power or light and in accordance with how we use it, so more will be given to us. Jesus had possessed this power or light, without measure, so that he became the Light, and the Light within (us) is Jesus Christ.” From a website regarding Quaker practice, by Ted Hoare.

The “suffering servant” of Isaiah’s gospel learned this truth long ago.<sup>3</sup> The Servant begins today’s text by reminding his hearers that God’s work started in him long ago – even before he was born. God’s work always precedes ours. Yet it is our work that makes God known. Our lives in whom God “*will be glorified.*” And the Servant is reminded, in a wonderful play on words, that the light we have been is too wonderful a gift to keep for ourselves. Too “*light a thing*” to be kept in our own house. We must join in the Servant’s work, answer God’s call, to become a “*light to the nations.*”

Old Testament scholar Gene Tucker offers this word of caution:

To be a ‘light to the nations’ does not... mean going out and converting ‘peoples from far away’ by word... Instead it means bearing affliction and hardship... and precisely thereby conveying the knowledge of God. To witness to the God of Israel is not to share information with others but to be faithful to God in such a way that confrontation will occur but will not be an end in itself. The witness leaves the final accomplishment to God, assured that affliction and hardship will be the means through which ‘my salvation shall reach to the ends of the earth.’<sup>4</sup>

God’s salvation will come to the world through our gifts, our light – when we are willing to take that light into the darkness – even in “affliction and hardship.”

If God has already given us everything there is to be received, and is intent on providing an opportunity for us to let that light shine... I wonder what is in store for us, as a church, this year? And I wonder if we will be willing to find it – even through affliction and hardship?

May it be so!

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<sup>3</sup> Technically, of course, Isaiah’s prophecy is not a “gospel,” but in that it announces “good news,” I am comfortable using this language.

<sup>4</sup> Gene M. Tucker, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Isaiah,” p.433.