

The Unopened Present

Hebrews 2:17-18

Different families have different habits when it comes to opening presents at Christmastime. I grew up in a Christmas-morning-only family. We didn't open up any presents until Christmas morning itself. The boys got up early to snoop around the tree, but we couldn't actually open the presents until after our special Christmas-morning breakfast. Brenda grew up with the tradition of opening one present on Christmas Eve and the rest on Christmas morning. That's how we do things now in the Ratliff family. I'm aware that some families open all their presents on Christmas-Eve.

There are probably a few more variations on opening Christmas presents, but there's one I've never run across: opening all the presents except one and leaving it unopened all year long. That wouldn't make any sense, would it? If someone gives you gifts, you should open them – all of them.

During the Advent season we think about the incarnation and what Jesus did in becoming “one of us.” One way to think about it is to view the incarnation as God's greatest gift to humanity. Actually, by becoming one of us Jesus has given us a whole cluster of gifts (another word for gift is “grace” – something we've been given that we haven't purchased and that we don't deserve). This morning we are going to consider one of the gifts associated with the incarnation that sometimes remains unopened – even by people who have believed in Jesus.

Please turn with me to Hebrews 2. In 2:14-16 the author of Hebrews describes how Jesus came to give us freedom from the fear of death and therefore the freedom to live fully in this life:

14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. 16 For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.

Jesus became one of us so that we would no longer be afraid of death. Those who trust in Jesus don't have to fear the grave. Believers in Jesus can live with great peace and security because our eternal destiny is secure. Our salvation is a foundational gift that Jesus gives.

As we continue in this passage we are going to see that there is another gift associated with our salvation that Jesus wants to give us. This is a gift that is often left unopened, a type of grace that we are often reluctant to receive from Jesus even though He fervently wants to give it to us. Listen to Hebrews 2:17.

17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

We read here that because of what Jesus sought to accomplish, “He *had* to be made like His brethren in all things.” What Jesus wanted to accomplish was to become a merciful and faithful

high priest. Jesus could have done a lot of things without becoming one of us, but being a merciful and faithful high priest wasn't one of them.

The book of Hebrews is especially concerned with explaining this aspect of Jesus' ministry. In the Old Covenant the high priest was the one who entered into the innermost room of the temple (the holy of holies) to present a yearly sacrifice for the sins of the people. Because the high priest was a human, he could represent humans in the Holy of holies.

If Jesus hadn't become one of us, He couldn't be *that* high priest. Because He took on flesh and blood and lived as we live, He was able to represent us as a merciful and faithful high priest. He didn't enter the earthly holy of holies in the temple; He entered the heavenly holy of holies and presented Himself as a sacrifice.

He is merciful because He has full sympathy with what we're going through; He is touched by our weakness and infirmity. He is faithful because He never faltered in carrying out the will of God here on earth.

We read here that Jesus is a high priest "in things pertaining to God," especially in making "propitiation for the sins of the people." On the cross He fully satisfied the wrath of God that we deserved. Because He is our propitiation, our sin is dealt with and we are able to enter into the most holy place with Jesus our high priest. In other words, the veil separating people from God has been torn in two and we have full access to God Himself. The incarnation qualified Jesus to be our merciful and faithful high priest, bringing us into the holy of holies – into the presence of God Himself.

But the high priestly ministry of Jesus didn't conclude with the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus. The high priestly ministry of Jesus continues – present tense – because Jesus even now comes to our rescue when needed. Again, the incarnation uniquely qualifies Him to do this.

18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

This is the gift that often remains unopened: the help that Jesus offers us in time of temptation. So often we find ourselves in the midst of some temptation or trial, feeling so helpless and alone, and we are oblivious to how Jesus wants to come to our rescue.

This verse indicates that Jesus was tempted in connection with His suffering. This is a key connection to make. Jesus suffered everything that is common to humanity – such as weariness, hunger, thirst, disappointment, anger, and the full range of human emotions and experience. But He also suffered in relation to His calling as our Messiah. He suffered as the One sent into this world to walk the path to the cross. As He pursued that calling, He was continually tempted to turn aside and take another path.

Before His public ministry Jesus went into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days. At the end of that time of intense fellowship with His Father, Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, to throw Himself down from the top of the temple, to worship Satan in order to gain the kingdoms of this world. Those were temptations to avoid the suffering to which He had been called.

Toward the end of His earthly ministry, He revealed to His disciples that He must be crucified and that He would be raised on the third day. When Peter understood what Jesus was saying, He took Jesus aside and rebuked Him; Peter didn't see how crucifixion could be part of God's plan. Jesus' response: "Get behind Me, Satan!" Jesus recognized Peter's rebuke as one more temptation from Satan to take a short-cut and to avoid the cross.

The 24 hours leading up to the crucifixion, Jesus experienced intense temptation to turn aside from the cross. On the cross He experienced mocking and humiliation that we can scarcely fathom. Peter records Jesus' reaction to all of this in 1 Peter 2:

23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously;

Jesus was tempted to return "evil for evil and insult for insult." Jesus was tempted in what He suffered. As He pursued the will of God He was tempted to turn aside and take shortcuts. In a sense our temptations are really the very same thing: as we pursue the will of God *we* are tempted to turn aside and take shortcuts; instead of pursuing the will of God, which usually involves a degree of suffering, *we* are tempted to take a path that is easier and less painful.

Because Jesus has walked in our shoes, He is perfectly qualified to come to our aid when we're tempted. He knows how difficult it is to keep on trusting God when we feel like taking matters into our own hands. He knows what it feels like to want to "tell people off" instead of entrusting oneself to God. And because of His resurrection, "He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." Jesus wants to give us this grace.

We need to wrestle with whether or not we are willing to receive this grace from Him. My perception is that this help Jesus wants to give us is *the unopened present* in the experience of many believers. So often we never look beyond our own wisdom and our own strength to deal with the issues we face. We feel so helpless, but in essence we are saying to God, "Thanks but no thanks" to the help He offers. That need not be the case.

When you think about it, in every area of life, we gravitate toward others who have the expertise we need and who know and understand what we're going through. We naturally seek out the people who can give us the help we need. If I have a toothache I go to my dentist (not my next door neighbor). When I have a problem with my car I go to an automotive shop. When I have theological questions there are certain people and resources I consult. You get the idea. And unless you're one of those people who wouldn't ask for directions even if you were lost in the desert, you do the same thing too! You naturally seek out the people who can give you the help you need.

Where do you go when you need help with your soul? To whom do you turn when you are facing temptations or trials in your life? Who is helping you become the most fully alive you can be? Without minimizing the role that other people play in our lives at such times, Hebrews 2 tells us that ultimately we should go to Jesus, our merciful and faithful high priest:

18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

This verse gives us a huge clue as to how we should read the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Sometimes we read how Jesus lived His life and think the opposite of what we're supposed to think. We think, "Jesus is amazing and I'm a loser." But we're supposed to think, "Jesus is amazing; He can teach me how to live my life as He lived His life." Or sometimes we read how Jesus talked with people who came to Him in all sorts of desperate conditions and think, "Jesus was gracious to them, but surely He would never be that patient with me." In reality, we are supposed to realize that the gospels show us exactly the types of things Jesus says to us.

Let me give an example of what I'm talking about. John 19 records that when Jesus was on the cross, He saw His mother standing there beside John. If anybody had a good excuse not to notice needs around Him, it was Jesus hanging on the cross. But Jesus noticed His mother. Mary had been told by Simeon when Jesus was 8 days old that "a sword will pierce your soul"; surely watching her son be crucified was part of the fulfillment of that prophecy. Out of compassion, Jesus said to Mary, "Woman, behold your son!" (speaking of John); Jesus said to John, "Behold your mother!" John records that "from that hour [John] took her into his own household" (John 19:27-28). At the height of His own suffering He showed compassion to others.

Jesus can teach us how to have that same type of compassion for others when we're in the midst of suffering. Jesus proved that suffering doesn't have to make us self-centered. Jesus showed us that you can "honor your father and mother" and "love your neighbor as yourself" even when you're hanging on a cross. Think of something difficult you're facing now – something that tends to fill you with anxiety and make you self-centered. If you haven't read John 19 you might think that the goal is simply to survive the ordeal you're experiencing. But Jesus' example makes clear that as others look at our suffering/trials, we have a unique opportunity to show *them* compassion. If we allow Him to do so, Jesus will "come to our aid" and rescue us from self-centeredness and teach us to show compassion when we suffer.

It is a common experience for parents to watch their children grow up and think, "I sure wish they would turn to me for help. If they would receive the wisdom I could give, they would avoid a world of pain and disappointment and would experience a lot more peace." Children who don't learn from their parents are inviting all sorts of dangers and disappointments; trial and error is a rough way to live your life. It's frustrating for parents when their children won't receive the wisdom and the help that they can offer.

I don't know that Jesus is "frustrated" when we don't receive the wisdom and practical help He offers, but it's a crying shame. Jesus became one of us in order to die for our sins, but also in order to demonstrate how this life can be lived. He suffered when He did – in part at least – so that He might come to our rescue when we face temptations and trials.

The book of Hebrews assures us that Jesus is uniquely qualified to come to our aid because He *knows* and *understands* what we're going through *and He is more than willing to come to our help!* Jesus can do this better than anybody!

Sometimes the question is posed whether or not Jesus can really relate to us – Him being God and all, Him never experiencing the personal guilt of having "blown it." The presupposition is

that Jesus can't understand our temptations because He was sinless. In reality, just the opposite is true. Because He never gave in to temptation, He experienced the full brunt of temptation. He never got to the point where He said, "Enough is enough. . . I'll give in to this temptation just to relieve the stress of resisting." Jesus experienced the full brunt of temptation without sinning. He's exactly the person to help us in time of need.

Hebrews 4:15-16 expresses it in this way:

15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The plea here is to draw near to God so that we can receive the mercy and the grace "in time of need." In other words, receive this present, open this gift! What is your greatest need at the moment? What is your area of greatest weakness? Where do you feel temptation the most keenly? Where do you feel the most misunderstood?

So often we feel like we need to solve these issues ourselves *before* we can experience Jesus. But it turns out that we experience Jesus as we let Him address these issues for us. When we seek Him in prayer and in the Word, we experience the help that only He can give.

Self-sufficiency is the primary thing that keeps us from receiving from God – saying to God, in effect, "Thanks but no thanks for the gift. I can handle this one on my own." But if we find ourselves needing grace and mercy *and* we draw near to God through our High Priest who knows and understands, we can be sure that we'll receive just *what* we need *when* we need it.

If I could urge anything upon you this morning, I'd urge you to receive *every* gift God wants to give you in Christ Jesus, especially this gift of "help in time of need." Leave no present unopened.