

Pastor Jim Lloyd

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Title: "WISE(men) Tips for Giving Better Gifts"

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Today our focus is on giving, and we will find our primary examples in the Magi or Wise men. 2 Corinthians 9:7 - *"Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."* If we were asked if this is true or false, most, maybe all, would say "true", correct? How about if we remove the word CHEERFUL - is it still true? "God loves a giver." How about if it read "God loves an UNCHEERFUL giver - is that true? God so LOVED the WORLD. The truth is God loves us all! The heart of the verse is the focus of "cheerful giving". God loves it when any giver gives CHEERFULLY. When we give cheerfully, we best reflect God's Son, Jesus. The greatest Gift - God's gift to us - JESUS! The greatest Giver - JESUS - gave His all, His life.

Acts 20:35 - *"In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" It is more blessed to GIVE than to receive. True or False. Some would say a hearty "Amen". Others might say, "I don't know about that. I think I like the receiving better." When I was young, I got a few deserved spankings in my life. From my perspective, it was more blessed to give than receive. I'd have rather been the father in those moments. At that age, I couldn't discern the blessing of receiving a spanking. When I visited the doctor's office and got a shot, I concurred again that it was more blessed to give than receive. I'd have rather been the doctor or nurse. I hardly think either of those examples were what Jesus had in mind when He said, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."* As kids, we were most often the recipients of gifts and did little giving. We easily became conditioned receivers. We didn't have to work at it, it happened rather easily. It's usually not until some are older that they may struggle with receiving. As we age, our responsibilities grow and we become the parent and thus WE become the givers. In life, people find themselves either in lack or in plenty. Which would you rather be? In LACK and unable to give, OR in PLENTY with much opportunity to give. Thus it's more blessed to give than receive. It's better to live having MORE THAN enough.*

It's commonly accepted that people should be compassionate during the Christmas season, and for the most part, it's a sociological fact that they are. Studies have indicated that people tend to DO more, GIVE more, and HELP OTHERS more during the month of December than any other time of the year. Part of the reason for this is that we have more opportunities to help others during this season. For example, most of you have probably given money to the Salvation Army already, simply because there was someone ringing a bell at the entrance of the mall, and it was convenient to give at that time. If the bell ringer was there in July, you might give then, too. It's a grand thing to show compassion during the holidays, but we all know that our acts of compassion shouldn't be limited to just the few weeks preceding and following Christmas. We should show Christmas compassion year round. We should give to others year round.

Today we're going to look at how we might do that. We're going to look at ways we can show Christmas compassion all year long. The story of the wise men teaches us several principles of giving. These principles work twelve months out of the year. So, as you're buying gifts this Christmas, you may do well to keep these ideas in mind. We are not so much focusing on the particular gifts given by the wise men, but rather the heart of these givers. Most, if not all of us, would struggle to give such valuable gifts. One source indicated that a brick of gold is worth about \$325,000 today and likely held more value in Jesus' time. It was also suggested that one of the other gifts may have been more valuable. Fortunately or unfortunately, however you look at it, I don't have an extra \$325,000 to buy my wife a gift. So, again, the focus is not so much on the particular gifts, but on our attitude when giving - particularly our giving to Jesus. In this story we see three principles on giving. Let's take a look at each one.

- 1. Give more than you expect to receive.** How many of you have ever attended a baby shower? Were gifts involved? Who was the recipient of the gifts? The baby. Did the baby ever reciprocate? Anyone ever gone to a baby shower and the baby had a gift for you? Why? They're too young to make money, too young to shop. Since they aren't born talking, they can't ask the sales clerk for assistance. Most of the time the shower is before the birth of the baby, so he or she is not even aware that they have received a gift. The list goes on. It would be silly to EXPECT a gift at a baby shower. When the wise men came to see Jesus, they knew they were NOT going to a "gift exchange." They were going to see a child, a toddler. The wise men didn't go to the manger. They went to a house. They were visiting a child who was, quite literally, born in a barn. His parents were poor. The probability and likely the possibility of reciprocation DID NOT exist. And, of course, the wise men didn't care. They came to GIVE, NOT to receive. The story is told of a young man named Bryan, whose

sister gave him an extravagant gift at Christmas - season tickets to the San Diego Chargers home games - when all he had given her was a set of potholders. Bryan was a little embarrassed by the disparity of the gifts and made up for it later, but his sister wasn't bothered by it at all. It didn't matter to her that she spent more than he did. WHY? She just wanted to give a special gift to her brother. I've known of situations where hard feelings developed in families because someone didn't get back as much as they put in. They felt cheated. Understand: when it comes to giving, you can't be cheated. The goal in giving is to give - PERIOD! TRUE STORY - While discussing options for exchanging Christmas gifts, one suggested this to her family: "Let's give each other the same gift this year - \$20 cash. When it comes time to open the presents, we'll take the \$20 bill we brought, and hand it to the person next to us. They'll take the \$20 bill they brought and hand it to the person next to them, and so on all the way around the room. That way, everybody gets a fair deal. Everyone walks in with \$20 and everyone walks out with \$20, and everyone is happy." Really? She was joking, of course, but there were some people who like that idea. That's NOT what giving is about. STORY - James Hewitt tells a story of a college friend named Paul who received a car from his brother for Christmas. A kid on the street saw his new car and said, "Hey mister, is that yours?" Paul said, "Yes, my brother gave it to me for Christmas." The kid was amazed and said, "Your brother gave it to you and it didn't cost you nothing?" He then said, "Boy, I wish..." Paul thought he was going to say, "I wish I HAD a brother like that." But the street kid surprised him. He said, "Boy, I wish I could BE a brother like that." *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."* There is a tremendous reward in giving. The wise men demonstrated to us that we do well when we give more than we expect to get.

2. **Give out of LOVE, not out of obligation.** Notice what Matthew says - *"They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him"* (vs. 11). Have you ever received a gift from someone with the impression that the gift was given more out of duty than desire? And if they really had a choice, they wouldn't have given you anything at all? WORSE YET - Have YOU ever given a gift with that attitude? That's not giving a gift, it's paying a bill. When you give with that attitude, most people can tell. The Bible teaches us to give out of love. Paul said, *"Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver"* (2 Corinthians 9:7). I heard of a brother and sister that had a fight and were not on speaking terms for over two years - but they exchange gifts each year at Christmas. When the sister was asked, "Why do you give a gift to someone you're not speaking to?" She said, "Because I give gifts to EVERYONE in my family." Obviously, this gift had very little meaning, and very little value. The gift she really needs to give is the gift of reconciliation. It's as simple as this: if your gift isn't motivated by love, it probably doesn't matter what the gift is OR what it costs. The wise men's gifts were special, not so much because they were valuable, but because they were given with a heart full of love for Jesus - a gift from kings to the King of Kings! ILLUSTRATION: In 1999 Pennsylvania's Republican Governor Tom Ridge sent out \$100 rebates on school-district property taxes. This happened just before the election, so naturally he was accused of trying to buy votes. Hundreds of tax-payers responded in an unexpected way - they returned the money to the school district. The Philadelphia school district received more than \$40,000 in rebate gifts. The most interesting part of this is that the majority of gifts came from people outside the Philadelphia school district, who felt the under-funded city schools needed the money more than their suburban schools. These people had nothing to gain by sending their money to another school district. They did it because THEY CARE. [Newsweek, Dec. 11, 2000, p.64).
3. **Give gifts that tell people what they're worth.** Matthew says - *"They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, and of incense, and of myrrh"* (vs. 11). Interesting gifts for a child, aren't they? According to the customs of the day, gold was the gift for a king; Incense was the gift for a priest; and Myrrh was the gift for one who is to die - it was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. When the wise men brought their gifts to Jesus, they didn't come bearing trinkets for a child. No white elephants here. They brought gifts that indicated who he truly was - the King of Kings, the great High Priest, the one who would die for the sins of the world. When you give, give a gift that says "I believe in you. You're worth something. I love you." I think it was in Los Angeles that a drive began a few years ago to give new shopping carts to the homeless, because many of them were using old, beat-up carts. Now, we have an obligation to help the homeless. However, I don't think the solution can be found in giving them new shopping carts. It's a gift that seems to say, "You're homeless and that's all you'll ever be, so here's a new buggy. Now leave us alone." A much better gift, obviously, would be to give the homeless: a place to sleep, or job training, or substance abuse counseling, or whatever it is they need to become the person God created them to be. We need, as a society, as a church, and as individuals, to look for ways to give gifts that affirm the value of the person receiving the gift. We can't give with the attitude that

says, "I'm giving this gift because I'm generous." We must give with the attitude that says, "I'm giving this gift because you're worth it." The Talmud says, "He who gives a coin to a poor man obtains six blessings, but he who addresses him with words of comfort obtains eleven blessings." What does that mean? It means that we should give in such a way that builds up the recipient. Sometimes we give condescendingly, and with too many strings attached. We try to use our gifts to manipulate people into doing what we want them to do. We give with the subtle message: "Now you owe me." That isn't giving, it's bribery. It doesn't build up the one who receives the gift; neither does it glorify God. The wise men brought valuable gifts to Jesus because they recognized His value. When you give this year, you would do well to give a gift that say, "You're worth something to me."

- 4. Conclusion.** Much of Christmas IS about giving. Sandi Patti sings the song, "The Father gave the Son. The Son gave the Spirit. The Spirit gives us life so we can give the gift of love. And the GIFT goes on and the gift goes on and the gift goes on and the gift goes on and on and on. " When we give, we need to give more than we hope to get. We need to give out of love, not obligation. And we need to give in a way that communicates to others "You are worth something to me." God gave His BELOVED Son. An old English poet said:

"What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what can I give Him - I'll give Him my heart."