

God Gives Us love

From the series, "Things God Gives Us at Christmas - And All Year Round"

By Phil Brainerd

Presented at Trinity Evangelical Free Church

Sunday, December 8, 2019

Introduction

When I was in fifth grade, around Christmas time, my schoolteacher read a story. I don't remember a lot from fifth grade, but I remember that story. In particular, I remember the ending. The story was written in 1905 by William Sydney Porter, better known by his pen name: O. Henry.



It was entitled, "The Gift of the Magi". The title is interesting because the Magi of the Christmas story aren't the main characters of this story. In fact, the story is about a young married couple living in New York City around the turn of the twentieth century. Their names are Jim and Della.



Let's call this a **complex** love story. Jim and Della are down on their luck. They have a place to live, but it's nothing to brag about. They own very little between them, and money is scarce. While Jim is away at work, Della counts through her savings. After doing so, she starts to cry. She's been scrimping and saving for months, and all she has to show for it is a small pile of coins. The next day is Christmas, and she has very little that she can use to buy a present for her

husband. She had dreamed of buying him something fine, something rare. But that doesn't look like it's going to happen.

However, Della has an idea. She realizes that she has one thing she can sell. She has a head of long, beautiful hair. When she lets it down, it reaches her knees. It's thick and luxurious. Della throws on her old coat and runs out the door of her tenement apartment. She races to the store of a woman who makes wigs. There, Della lets down her hair. She is offered enough money to buy something very special for her husband. Della takes the offer, and little bit later, she has a lot less hair, but a lot more money. She's ready to shop.

After some looking, Della finds what she's looking for. Although this couple has very little, each has one special thing. Della had her hair. Jim has a very special watch. It was owned by his father, and his grandfather before that. Jim is very proud of that watch. There's something about a poor man owning one expensive thing that takes the edge off of living at the bottom of the economic ladder. Unfortunately, this very special watch was tied to an old piece of scrap leather. Della found a beautiful silver chain that would be the perfect complement to Jim's family heirloom watch. She buys the chain and heads home, ready to surprise her man.

Jim comes in the door right on schedule. He takes one look at his bride, who now have very little hair, and his face turns into a blank stare. Della asks him to forgive her for cutting off all her hair and shows him what she bought.

Jim's expression doesn't change. He pulls out a package that contains something he just bought.

Many times, he and Della would go for walks in the main part of town. Often, they passed a jewelry store. In the window were some beautiful combs made from tortoise shell with jewels on the rims. They were a perfect match for Della's beautiful hair. Della would always light up when she saw them. But, they were far too expensive for someone with Jim's meager salary. Jim would always watch with a heavy heart as Della gave a loving smile and then looked to the ground.

Jim had decided he wanted to buy something really special for Della this Christmas. But he didn't have any money, either. ***So, he sold his watch.***

Here's why I remember the story. The story ends with two people who loved each other dearly. They loved each other so much, that they both gave up the most valuable things they had. But the result of their sacrifice were objects that now had little value.

Right about now, someone is saying, "Hey Pastor – this is the holiday season. You're supposed to tell happy stories! What is it with this 'complex' love story business?" I have to say, I thought something like that in fifth grade. As it turns out, there is more to the story that will give it a perfectly good ending. We'll get to that in a bit.

A while back, I gave a talk on the complexity of God. God is complex. So, a complex love story works very well with him. We're in our holiday series: "Things God Gives Us at Christmas – And All Year Round". Today we're going to talk about the fact that "God Gives Us Love."

Last week, we talked about the fact that God gives us hope. We looked at two things during that presentation, and we're going to do something similar today. We need to discuss:

- I. The meaning of the word 'Love', and
- II. What is the source of love?

Let's get to it.

I. The Meaning of the Word 'Love'

Last time, when we spoke about hope, we talked about the way people use the word and the way that God uses the word. Let's use that as an example today.

When people use the word 'hope', they're talking about something they'd like to see. When you watch a sporting event, you want your team to win. So, you say, "I hope my team wins". But, your team may not win. There are two or more possibilities, and one of them would make you happy. That's earthly hope.

We learned last time that, when the Bible uses the word "hope", it's more like the word "assurance". When we place our hope in God, we know that what he says will happen. So, people use the word "hope" to say, "maybe". God uses the word "hope" to say, "certainly".

In a similar way, people use the word "love" differently than the way the Bible uses it. People use the word 'love' for all kinds of things. If you really like ice cream, then you say, "I love ice cream". This little guy certainly does.



We have more lofty uses for the word 'love', and we often use them. Poets talk about it. Singers sing about it. But in the end, love can mean a lot of different things. Because of this, when I talk

about God's love, I often suggest that we need to upgrade the word. A better word would be, "cherish". So, instead of saying "God loves you", we're saying, "God cherishes you".

In order to understand why this is true, we need to move on to the second point.

II. What is the source of love?

Again, recall from our last session: There's a reason why people use the word "hope" differently than the way God uses it. It's the source of hope. If your hope is in humans, then hope is random. When you hope your team wins, your team is made up of humans. So, they might win, or they might not win.

So, we have an important principle:

If you place your hope in random, limited things, your hope is random and limited.

We learned last week that hope in God is very different.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

When God uses the word "hope", it's associated with his plan. He is sovereign; that means he's in total control of his universe. Because he is in total control, his plans can not fail. So, when God uses the word "hope", it would better be stated as "assurance", or "certainty", or "confident expectation".

It's the same with love. The love of people, who are limited, and the love of God are very different things.

Let's consider the story we started off with today. To be fair to the story, here's how the author closes – He says we have two young people who love each other so much, they're willing to give the most valuable things they own. Now they know it. So, the author says, they have something much more important than the things they gave up.

This is an idealistic author writing about idealistic people. To those who live in the real world, let me ask a question: *Is this how it works out all the time? Or, even most of the time?*

Now, one of the wonderful things about life is the fact that many people have seen a moment; a glimmering moment, of what it's like to want to give anything for someone you love. *It's just that it doesn't last forever.* Sometimes, sadly, it doesn't even last very long.

I heard psychologist James Dobson talk about this once. One day some time after the wedding, the wife comes home on a Saturday afternoon. Her man is asleep on the sofa. He has some

drool coming out of the corner of his mouth. He's snoring – loudly. At that moment, something changes.

Sometimes the man comes home and finds his wife with no make-up. She hasn't done her hair. She's wearing an "around-the-house" outfit, not the stylish things she wore when they were dating. She's put on a few pounds. At that moment, something changes.

Now, many times, God is gracious to people. At times like this, their love merely changes. They still love each other despite the fact some that some circumstances of their marriage have changed. Their love is just different.

At other times though, well, the divorce courts are full of the other times.

Or maybe people just live what writer Henry David Thoreau called "...lives of quiet desperation." For these people worldly love is like the daisy: "He loves me, he loves me not".



Sometimes, people rationalize this. I heard a man speak about this once. He said, "Would anybody really want to go through their entire lives up on a mountaintop where every minute goes to thinking about someone else? Would anybody want to live their entire life with the level of energy and emotion that comes with young love?" That's how a limited human being thinks. And, for us mortal humans who live on the earth, maybe there's something to that.

But...



What if there is someone in the universe who loves you dearly. Human words can not express the love that he has for you. I've suggested the word "cherish", but that doesn't even come close. Whatever you imagine love should be - passionate, caring, giving - Whatever you think love should be, you can multiple that times a thousand (just to start).

This love is unchanging, because its source is unchanging. And this love is eternal, because its source is eternal. This love is unlimited, because the source of this love is infinite.

This love comes from God.

There is a verse of Scripture that is commonly known among followers of Jesus. It's so commonly quoted that I must be careful citing it for fear it might be over-used. Here it is:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Why is this one of the most well-known sentences in the Bible? For lots of reasons. One is that it tells us the source of the love we long for. "For **God** so loved the world". We're not talking about human love. We're talking about God's love.

This is the love that God offers us at Christmas, and all year round.

This love is so vast that I could spend months talking about it. Let's limit our conversation today to the fact that God gave us his Son, Jesus Christ.

Why did he do that? And why is this so important at Christmas?

We have a terrible problem. Someday, we all perish. We all die. Death is the greatest enemy that any human faces. We face death because of something called sin.

For the wages of sin is death... (Romans 6:23)

Because God loves you, because he cherishes you, he doesn't want you to die in your sins. Instead, he wants you to have eternal life. This is why it's so important that we're dealing with God here.

Every now and then, I pull out fives sentences that help us to face challenges.

- God is First.
- God is in control.
- God knows what he's doing.
- God is good.

- God cherishes me.

Let's see how those statements fit in with our discussion today.

God is First

Imagine that a man has been found guilty of a terrible crime, and he's sentenced to prison. But, there's good news! There are some other inmates who really like him. Sadly, that's no help, because those other inmates are guilty, too. They have no authority to let anyone out.

Here's what the Bible says about Jesus Christ. He appeared to the apostle John, and John wrote about what he saw in the book of Revelation.

...I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (Rev 1:17b-18)

Jesus has the keys to death. Because he is first, he has the authority to release you from the penalty of your sin.

God is in Control

Next, God is sovereign; he's in total control of his universe.

Let's look again at the man in our previous example. He's accused of murder. There are a dozen witnesses. There's DNA evidence. He's found guilty and sentenced to death. I've seen something in these cases, more than once. Maybe you've seen it on TV? It's the night of the execution. There's a crowd outside the prison. There are protesters and advocates for the man who is about to be executed. The press interviews all kinds of people.

One of the people in the crowd is the prisoner's mother. The reporter asks, "Do you have anything to say?" She replies with tears: "Don't kill my boy. He's a good boy. He's innocent".

People who know the case can see that this woman is grieving. She's crying. She's begging. Her love for her son has blinded her to the obvious. Her son is guilty, and she has no power to do anything about his fate.

What would it be like to face execution, and to have someone love you dearly, **but they have no power to help?**

Here's what God gives to us: Paul discusses it in the opening of his letter to the Romans:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and

was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, (Romans 1:1-4)

God showed his power by raising Jesus from the dead. God is in control. That means he has the power to save us.

God knows what he's doing.

How about the statement that God knows what he's doing? Let's look at our opening story. We have two young people in love. They certainly had love, **but they didn't have knowledge.**

Della didn't know that Jim was about to sell his watch. Jim didn't know that Della would give into an impulse and cut off the hair that she had ever since he knew here. And so, yes, they loved each other, but they suffered unnecessary loss.

That's why it's so important that God knows what he's doing. Let's look at the first part of that passage we just read in Romans:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, **which he promised beforehand through his prophets** in the holy Scriptures... (Romans 1:1-2 emphasis mine)

Because God is in control of the universe, he has a plan. He knows all the possible things that may block his plan, and he knows what to do. So, his plan is effective.

I don't want to be flippant. The story of Christ is vitally important and should be treated with the utmost respect. But, imagine the following: God has announced centuries in advance that a very special person would be born in Bethlehem. It comes time for Jesus to be conceived by the Holy spirit in the virgin Mary.

Then, something goes wrong. Jesus says, "Hey Father, what happened?" The Father says, "Oh, I'm so sorry – There was a cloud in the way! I didn't see that, so I missed. I made those prophecies so long ago...I guess it's just impossible to foresee all the details." It this could happen then sorry, no Christmas story.

But, that's not what happened. It didn't happen because God knew what he was doing. He always has, and he always will.

God is Good.

What about the statement that God is good?



You're looking at a picture of Adolf Hitler and his girlfriend, Eva Braun. There is almost universal agreement that Adolf Hitler is one of the greatest monsters to ever come from the Human Race. He is believed to have been responsible for the deaths of 7 million people in the concentration camps. The Second World War, which he started, is believed to have caused the deaths of 40 million people in Europe.

Adolf Hitler loved his girlfriend Eva.

Question: *What would it be like to be loved by one of the most evil people in history?*

Worse than that, the evil of Hitler made him lose. He wanted to be emperor of the world. Instead, Adolf Hitler found himself locked into a bunker in Berlin at the closing days of World War II. The Americans were coming from the west, the Russians were coming from the east. It was only a matter of time.

Eva was with him. As a gesture of love, he married her there in the bunker. A short while later, as his bunker was about to be taken, Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun kneeled to the ground. Hitler instructed his closest followers to put a gun to each of their heads and pull the trigger. *Being loved by an evil man made the life of Eva Braun a tragedy of epic proportions.*

But you, my friends are loved – in fact, you are cherished by God. And he is good. Listen to what the scriptures say about him:

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever. (1 Chronicles 16:34)

Conclusion

We started with a complex love story, "The gift of the Magi". I'd like to close with another. It's a love story about a Father and a Son. In fact, it's about the Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ.

One day, before the creation of the world, the Father looked ahead and saw fallen humankind. He looked at you and me. He saw us perishing, about to receive the punishment for our sins. He felt love. He felt mercy and compassion.

He knew he needed to find a solution. We don't know how long it took; God lives outside of time as we know it. Perhaps it took a million-million years. Perhaps the infinite and all-knowing God knew in an instant what to do. *He knew he had to send his son.*

I once heard a talk by a man who served as a soldier. He went into battle and faced death on multiple occasions. Someone asked him why he did it. He replied, "I would gladly go into battle a thousand times if I can prevent the day that my son will need to go." That's a father who loves his son.

Surely the Father would have gone himself. But, in his infinite knowledge he knew the Son would be the best. So, he did something that must have been incredibly painful for him. He said, "My Son, whom I love, you must leave the sacred halls of heaven where you are honored and worshipped, and you must live as a human. You must suffer pain and torment. You will be nailed to a cross. There, you must allow me to pour out on you the wrath that is built up for the sins of all the fallen humans. You must do this so that they can be saved."

Jesus looked out over the throng of humanity on earth, and he loved us, too. He, too, felt love, compassion and mercy. And he loved his Father.

Because of love, the Father sent his precious Son. Because of his love for us and for his Father, Jesus said, "yes".

God is first. God is in control. God knows what he's doing. So, the plan succeeded.

There are things that God gives us at Christmas, and all year round. One of those things is love. Friends, what kind of love do you want? Earthly love is fine, but it's imperfect. It's based in limited human beings. The love of God shares every quality of God. It's infinite, it's unchanging, it's perfect.

Friends, God loves you. In fact, he cherishes you.

If you've never received the gift of God's love; If you've never called on Jesus to save you from your sins, Now is the time. Please contact us at Trinity Church of Teaneck, TrinityTeaneck.org, or visit Billy Graham's web site, PeaceWithGod.net.

God wants you to enjoy his perfect love, now, and for eternity.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate the Advent of Jesus Christ, his birth. We will celebrate the fact that the King of heaven left his throne. He traded that heavenly throne for an earthly one: the

lap of his mother, Mary. There he was worshipped by poor shepherds and wise men from a distant land, and angels from the realms of glory.

Let's reflect on the love that God showed us on that day almost 2000 years ago. Let's allow God's love to fill our hearts so that we can not help but return it. As we look forward to that celebration, let's join with the shepherds and the wise men and the angels. Let's join with those who have sung the song of Christmas: "O, come! Let us adore him."