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The Ultimate Gift

Galatians 4:1-7

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Well, it's Christmas time—the most wonderful time of the year, right? Over the next few days most of us will be gathered in living rooms, around Christmas trees, opening up gifts, and that time around the tree and gift opening is loaded with memories for most of us, isn't it? We can all remember some of the worst gifts we've received and we remember some of the best gifts we've ever received. Those are just amazing memories. One of my favorite Christmas memories was when I was twelve and I really wanted a watch. I thought it was time for me to be a man and have a watch—a real watch. So I asked for it and asked for it. I was very concerned about a week out whether or not I was going to get this watch, so while my mom and dad were gone, I began to sneak around the house to find where the unwrapped gifts were. This is why you should gift wrap your presents right away. I found them in the closet of my parents' bedroom and sure enough there it was in a box, a beautiful watch. Well evidently over the next few days I seemed quite confident about the gift I was about to receive. So come Christmas morning—four or five gifts—I saw the one that looked like the shape of the box the watch was in. I left that one until last because I knew what that was. I opened my other gifts, got to that gift and I said, "I know what this is." "Really, what is it?" "Well, it's a watch." "Well, open it up!" So I opened it up and there, instead of a watch was a one dollar bill, at which I began to protest until this confession came out. They painfully dragged this confession out of me of how I had done this. And I'm sulking and kind of pouting about the fact that I didn't get a watch, and they didn't offer the watch to me at that point. It was about fifteen minutes later and I noticed my dad sort of stretching out his arm (*laughter*) and doing this, and there was my watch; I finally got the watch. I learned a very valuable lesson that day: if you're going to peek, don't let on. (*laughter*). Parents are about to shoot me right now. *(laughter)*

You know, as much fun as it is to get gifts, it's really more fun to give, isn't it? I mean there's really nothing like watching the delight on the faces of people as they open a gift they really love. The squeals of laughter from children, the smiles, the kisses, the hugs, the thank yous; I mean it really is awesome to be able to give. It's just those moments that you delight in. So imagine what it would be like to love someone very, very deeply and you think about them constantly and as you look at them and you see them, you see that there's some significant, real needs that they have—and you know the perfect thing for them. You know the gift that would meet every need they have, that would deeply satisfy them and bring them long-term forever joy and delight. And so you go to great lengths, using all of your resources to make that gift available to that one you love. And come Christmas morning that gift is there and it's sitting under the tree or beside the tree, and this individual that you love has three or four other gifts and all the gifts are kind of gathered around and he or she chooses the first gift to open, and it's not your gift. And the second gift, and it's not your gift. And the third gift, and it's not your gift and pretty soon they're playing with the gifts they've already received and they've run off to enjoy the other gifts and there the gift that you spent so much thought and time on, that you know they need and would deeply satisfy them, is still sitting there beside the tree. The end of the day, the gift is still sitting there. And even when you urge them, "Hey, why don't you go open the gift I got for you?" they just leave it. Christmastime comes and goes and the tree is taken down and the gift is still sitting there. The last snow of March melts and the buds begin to appear in April and the gift is still sitting there. Spring turns to summer, summer to fall, fall to winter; you put up the tree again and the gift from last year is still sitting there, unopened. Month after month, year after year, this amazing gift specially designed, perfectly

meeting the need and satisfying the soul of this one you love still sits unopened. If you can feel just a little bit of how painful that might be, perhaps we have just a glimmer into the sadness no doubt God feels when this incredible gift of Jesus remains unopened by millions of people. Millions of people who will actually celebrate the coming of the gift at Christmas, but leave it unopened for themselves. So this morning I want to just remind us in case you're one of those who hasn't yet opened the gift. Or perhaps you have and you've forgotten how great a gift it really is. I want to remind us again of what is truly in this gift of Jesus at Christmas.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Galatians, Chapter 4—one of my favorite, very brief descriptions of the Christmas gift of Jesus. And really everything that it entails is encapsulated here in just a few verses, beginning in verse 1:

> **Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.** (*NASB, Galatians 4:1-3)

Paul begins this section by describing our condition before we opened the gift. He's writing to people who've opened the gift, but he reminds us of whom we were before. We were in bondage to **the elemental things of this world.** And he uses an illustration that the people of Galatia would have clearly understood and appreciated because in the ancient Roman world, children really had the same status as a slave until a time set by the father, when he thought a child was ready to inherit the full rights and privileges of sonship or being a daughter. Until then, they were basically under guardians and managers and really no different than a slave in their standing. The father, then, determined when the child was ready to become a full-fledged privileged child of that family. So Paul said, "That's how we were before Christ. *We were under the management and guardians of the elemental things of this world*. We were, by nature, slaves to the elemental things of this world." Another way of saying that is just the world system, that we were enslaved to the system of how the world works.

I think it's primarily made up of two different kinds of enslavement. One is failing to worship and honor God as God, and so, therefore, making other gods to worship. The Scripture calls it *idolatry* and there are all kinds of gods. There are religious gods; there are secular gods. There are the gods of money, sex, power, status, pleasure. People naturally, before Christ, find other things to worship than the true God. And while we make these gods and serve these gods and worship these gods and give ourselves to these gods, they demand more and more and more from us and deliver less and less and less, and we find ourselves enslaved to these gods that are really no gods at all. The other thing we do in our condition before we open the gift of Christ, is we like to play god ourselves. We like to dominate and control people. We use and abuse people and so we play god in other people's lives. So this god-making and this god-playing defines our enslavement that leaves us empty and in serious trouble.

The Old Testament Law, particularly the Ten Commandments, really focused on those two things. The first five commandments talked about making other gods and how wrong that is. And the last five talk about playing God in other people's lives and the damage that's done from that. So we all find ourselves apart from receiving this gift, as slaves to these things. Many of us, deep in our hearts, if we would acknowledge it, would say, "That's me. I'm enslaved to things that I thought would bring me life and joy and peace and happiness, and I find myself empty and lonely and it's not working; I find myself enslaved to the thing that I thought would really bring me life." And Paul

says that's our condition until we receive this gift. We're thumbing our nose in God's face, refusing to acknowledge Him as God, and we're enslaved to all of these false gods. Verse 4:

But…

But is a great word because it says what we've just read isn't going to stay that way. There's a solution. There's another alternative to what was just described.

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law,

We would say, instead of **in the fullness of time**, we would say "*at just the right moment*." And we're reminded in this verse that God has this impeccable timing, doesn't He? I mean if you look back and you really think about, when could Jesus have come in all of human history? You have to look at the time when He showed up and say, "You know that was the absolute perfect time." It's a little hard to imagine Jesus coming the first time into our world today. But it was religiously just the right moment. The Jews were hungry. There were synagogues that had been built all over the nation. There was this thirst and hunger after years of silence, longing, this longing for the Messiah, and into that perfect moment, Jesus came. It was culturally just the right moment. There was a common language that had spread throughout the land. There were roads; there were ways of traveling. So it was the perfect time for Jesus to come and then the message of this gift to spread quickly. It was politically just the right time. There was just enough peace from the Roman rule that the church and the message could flourish and the gospel could spread.

So into this perfect moment, what did God do? **He sent forth His Son**, and that phrase is loaded with theology. Because what it reminds us is that Jesus did not originate at His conception in Mary's womb or at His birth in the manger in Bethlehem. Jesus existed long before these events of Christmas. He was sent forth from heaven by the Father; God the Son was eternally co-existent with God the Father, so this is God coming into our world. **God sent forth His Son.** But it always says or reminds us He was **born of a woman, born under the Law.** He was fully human and fully God. And He was under the same judgment or way of being evaluated and judged as all of us are—the Law. And yet, Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life. Not once did He ever do anything other than worship and honor His Father—absolutely and completely. And never once did he treat another individual less than God would want Him to treat them. And so He was born under the Law and lived a perfect life. So the God-man has now come, but come to do what? We get to the heart of what is offered in this gift of Jesus. Verse 5:

…so that He might redeem those who were under the Law,

Redeem is a word connected to slavery. So we said we are bound and enslaved to sin and these false gods and to playing god and yet God came, Jesus came, to *redeem* us—that is to buy us out of slavery. And He did that at a very high cost—the cost of His own shed blood, enduring the full wrath of God. That was the payment that was due to free someone out of slavery—death! Jesus endured that death so that He might emancipate us and free us out of slavery. So that you, when you receive the gift of Jesus, are freer than you could ever possibly imagine. You are free from the guilt of sin. You are free from the curse of sin. You are free from its stranglehold on your life—it no longer has to dominate and control you. When you receive the gift of Jesus, you receive your certificate of freedom from everything that has enslaved you.

Now you recall at the end of the Civil War when the Emancipation Proclamation was given and as the war came to an end, millions of slaves were free all across the South. But over the coming months and years, hundreds and thousands of them died from starvation and disease because they had nowhere to go. They were free, but free for what? Free to go where? But that's not the condition that God leaves us in. He not only redeems us, but notice what else He does:

> **…that we might receive the adoption as sons.** (Vs. 5b)

Not only does God set us free in Christ, but He adopts us into His own family. We become His children. There's a powerful imagery in adoption because someone who was without a place to go, without an identity, without a home, without a family, is chosen and selected and brought into a family. That is what God has done with us when we open the gift; He adopts us into His own family. And now we have a new identity—we belong to Him; we're one of His children and that is something that makes all the difference in the world. There's great security in that. There's great hope in that. We find our significance in that. We become the children of God. He delights to do this even though we have been rebellious and arrogant. Nothing gives God greater pleasure than to bring us home and make us part of His family. But there's even more.

> **Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"** (Vs. 6)

You'll notice that for the second time in this brief passage it says, **God sent forth**—this time, **the Spirit**. The first time He sent His Son into the world. Jesus accomplished His mission. Now He **sent forth the Spirit**, also indicating that the Holy Spirit is God and He's sent forth out of heaven—but to where? Into the hearts of His children! At the moment you open the gift of Jesus and receive it for yourself, God's very presence comes to dwell with you—in you—in your heart! And He said, "I will never leave you. I will never forsake you." From that moment forward for all of eternity, God is forever living with and in you.

This meets the need of so many in our world who are so lonely. Loneliness is one of the most significant challenges, problems, of our day and yet God has come near. And notice that He lives not only within us, but notice the kind of relationship He wants to have with us. **He sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, "Abba! Father!"** This is a term of endearment that means *daddy* or *papa*. God wants this deep intimate relationship with us. He wants us to interact with Him. He wants us to involve Him in every aspect of our life, just like we as fathers want to be involved in every aspect of our children's lives. We want them to talk to us; we want them to invite us in; we want to converse about everything. We want to offer our wisdom and our counsel and our help and our guidance. And we want to give them love and reassurance when they're faltering and failing, and God wants the same thing. That's what He offers us in Jesus—His continual presence and a deeply, meaningful, ever-growing relationship. This is papa. This isn't a God to be feared now. This is a God who's come near and He's come close and He's my daddy. And He's there every single step of the way, and the first day you believe is just the beginning. It gets richer and deeper and better every single day of your life. In fact in Corinthians Paul says, "The outer man is dying, but the inner man, who's connecting deeply with Jesus, is growing and getting stronger day by day." This is an awesome, awesome part of the gift that we receive when we receive Jesus. And you know it's very unique and special. While every child of God gets a certificate of freedom, and a certificate of adoption, no one will relate to God exactly the same way you do. It's a special relationship. It's unique to you and God.

My father died two years ago, and as we gathered at the graveside and at the funeral, there were four of us as kids and nineteen grandchildren and every single one of us had a unique way of relating to my dad that was told...a special nickname...special jokes...special connection. Everyone was different and unique. No two had exactly the same kind of relationship and connection with my dad. It was that special! And that's the uniqueness and the beauty of this gift. Every single one of us will have a very unique and special relationship with God that will be unlike the relationship He has with any other person! Papa...Daddy...but there's more. Verse 7:

Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

What he's saying here is that we will inherit the family fortune as a son. We're all sons in Christ. We're all inheritors of all the riches of the family. We were singing about Jesus being the King today. The Scripture tells us that because of the Son's, because of Jesus' obedience to the Father, the Father is going to give all of creation to the Son as a gift to rule and reign over. In the new heaven and the new earth, Christ will be King. But the Scripture tells us that as sons, we will inherit that with Christ. We will reign with Jesus forever and ever over everything. In other words, your future in Christ is brighter than you could ever possibly dream or imagine. You are wealthy and have the enjoyment and delight of the new heaven and the new earth forever and forever. You just can't even imagine it. We can't even wrap our minds around all that God has prepared for us because we're heirs.

So this morning, if you have not ever opened this gift, why? What's holding you back? What would cause you to settle for something less than this amazing gift of freedom, redemption and adoption and an intimate relationship and an inheritance that will blow the mind? C.S. Lewis said,

> *"It would seem that God finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*

Perhaps you've settled. My heart's cry for you this morning would be, "Open the gift!" And how do we open the gift? We open the gift by putting our faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus, that He came from heaven, lived a sinless life, died the death that we deserved to die, rose again from the dead, conquering sin and death and hell and reigns forevermore. If we believe that He did that for me, then I've opened the gift and I find freedom and adoption and an intimate relationship and a future that is beyond imagination. If you could see into heaven this morning, and get a glimpse of the face of God, you would see a face that would look so lovingly, so longingly at you and pleading with you, "Open the gift. See what I have for you. Don't leave it. Don't leave it in the corner. Don't settle for something less. Open the gift."

Many of us here this morning have opened the gift. We've received Jesus but for some strange reason, we have not entered fully into this relationship. We have Him. We have the ticket to heaven; we know He's there, but we don't engage with Him, embrace Him, as the most importance relationship in the world. This is the relationship above all relationships! No other relationship will ever satisfy like the relationship with God. On your worst day, He will be there and you will go through it together. On your absolute best day, in the midst of celebration and joy and delight, He will be there celebrating with you. And He wants to walk with you. He wants to be a part of every decision, every moment of every single day. So if you've opened the gift, I would just say, embrace the gift to the fullest. And may I remind us, as we close, that when you embrace the gift, it changes

us to the point that the light of Christ living in us will shine out through us to others. Because here's the amazing reality: God has gift wrapped this gift of Jesus and offered it to the world in a package that's you and me. As one person said, "You are the only Bible many people will ever read." So the question is: when people look at your life and at my life, are they compelled to want to open the gift? Do they want what we have? If we're embracing Jesus and walking with Jesus and letting Him fill us every single day, I think it will be so compelling people will want what we have! But if not, they may actually be repulsed—and the tragedy will continue—a gift left unopened. So open the gift this morning. Receive Christ. And if you have it, embrace Him to the fullest and share the gift this Christmas. Let other people see and know this is why we celebrate Christmas. We wouldn't even have this holiday. We wouldn't give gifts to one another if it hadn't been for this most amazing, incredible, indescribable gift of eternal life in Christ.

Our Father, we are so thankful that in our sinfulness and our rebellion, You were not turned away but You came near and paid the ultimate price. And now this invitation is ours. Lord, speak to us by Your spirit this morning. Draw us to Yourself. I pray that there would be some in this room that won't let this hour go without opening the gift for themselves. And for all of us, Lord, that we would embrace You to the absolute fullest because nothing can compare to what we have in Christ. Please do this work in us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Video:

When I found out I was pregnant, it just wasn't like it was supposed to be. Here I was, talking about it in a clinic where they're saying, "Well, maybe abortion is a good idea. You are just a freshman in college." I just went on autopilot. I think I was in denial about being alone. But in my heart of hearts, I just, I already loved this little being that was growing inside of me.

As a child, I did not know how to feel about God. I feared God. I knew to believe in God, but I think where I fell short was feeling God's love and acceptance. It's harder to follow God when you don't even know if he loves you or if you're lost. As I got into high school, I tried to find love and acceptance in my friends and in different activities, just trying to keep busy. And then it turned into parties. I wasn't going to be alone on a Friday or Saturday night. I wanted to fit in, so I started to do what everyone else was doing.

By my freshman year of college, I was still looking for love and acceptance and friends and parties but then it moved on to, "Okay, what guy is going to love and accept me?" I had a boyfriend that was back and forth. It wasn't serious but yet we were engaging in sex. There was no real trust. All my friends were having sex. The people that I was hanging out with, I didn't know anyone that wasn't having sex so it was something you did to fit in and it was a lie. You don't feel better. There was no reason for it, not without that trust and that love and especially from God first.

When I became pregnant, I was alone and it was really scary. A lot of people said, "You can have an abortion. It's no big deal." In my heart of hearts, that's not really what I wanted. I wanted to see a doctor, see what he would say. I got on Medicaid and, for whatever reason, this doctor could take another Medicaid patient, so by luck I landed in Dr. Plambeck's office. I mean, I know now he's a believer, but I think that's why I felt it was almost like, you know, a glass of water because he was never going to recommend that I have an abortion. I felt like I was taken care of. I felt like I mattered. When I told my parents, they saw that I was broken and they reached out and supported

me. I quit drinking. I quit partying. And I started praying to God. That's not something I was doing. I needed someone to walk with me and I started to feel like he was there.

This one (photo) is my favorite. She's just my goofy girl from the beginning. This is one of our Christmas card photos. Because of Taylyn, I had a reason to do the right thing and it wasn't just for myself. This one she was just three. I just wanted to get pictures with her. I had been gone for a bit and I missed her like crazy. But it started me on that path. You know, I didn't just want to do the right thing for her. I wanted to do the right thing for God. I really had to walk the walk and be that good example for her.

During Taylyn's middle school years I would say is when we really started getting plugged in with the youth activities here and there must have been other kids accepting her and these youth leaders accepting her because she kept wanting to come back and the next thing I knew she was helping, and serving, and volunteering and the next thing I know she's leading a group here or leading a group there and she just keeps staying plugged in. I can't believe how big God's grace is because He did give me the most amazing gift. She is such a loving person. She has such a big heart. I couldn't be more proud of her. She's so accepting. That was something I always missed as a teenager; I was always looking for that acceptance, and here I have this blessing from God that she accepts everyone. God had a plan all along and I'm so forever thankful for the trials that have led me to Jesus and to feel His love. He never stopped and He never gave up on me. I've been volunteering regularly at the Pregnancy Center now and I've been able to speak my story. I feel like God's not done with me yet. He used that brokenness and He redeemed me. He redeemed my daughter. And more beautifully, Jesus is front and center and He's taking care of us.

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