**SERMON THE GREATEST GIFT December 24, 2022**

One thing that everybody thinks about tonight or tomorrow morning is Christmas gifts. So, let’s discuss three questions:

1. What do you want for Christmas?
2. What will you get?
3. What do you really need?

First, what do you want for Christmas? Of course, your answer will vary depending on your age. If you are a child, you will have a list a mile long with the latest toys and fads. When our sons were young, I once made the mistake of taking them to Toy-R-Us and asking them what they wanted for Christmas. Of course, their list expanded as we went down each aisle, and included every toy in the store.

The father of a small girl asked her what she would like most for Christmas. The girl, realizing that her mother was expecting, replied: “A baby brother.” To everyone’s delight, the mother came back home from the hospital on Christmas Eve with a baby boy in her arms. Sometime later, the father said to his daughter: “And what about next Christmas, what would you like.” After some thought, the little girl said: “Well, if it’s not too much trouble and too uncomfortable for mom, I’d like a pony!”

Now if you are a young adult, you most likely want the latest smartphone, electronic games, clothing, a car or money. When our sons were college students, they only wanted money. They told me to not be a scrooge and reminded me that God loves a cheerful giver. In addition, they would drop hints that eventually they would be the ones who will choose my nursing home.

Couples in their 30s or 40s are most likely to ask for furniture or a home to put it in.

There were three sons who grew up and had very successful careers. Getting back together, they discussed the gifts that they were able give their elderly mother. Of course, as brothers, they were competitive and always trying to outdo each other. The first son said: “I built a big house for our mother.” In response, the second son said: “Well, I sent her a Mercedes with a driver.” The third son smiled and said: “Well, I’ve got you both beat. You remember how much mom enjoys reading the Bible? And you know how her eyesight is failing and she can’t see very well anymore? Well, I sent her a remarkable parrot that can recite the entire Bible. It took the elders of the church 12 years to train him. He’s one of a kind. All mom has to do is name a book, chapter and verse, and the parrot will recite it.”

Later the mother sent thank you letters to each of her sons for their generous gifts. “Milton,” she wrote one son, “The house you built is so large. I only live in one room, but I have to clean the whole house.” “Gerald,” she wrote her second son, “I am too old to travel anymore. I stay at home most of the time, so I rarely use the Mercedes, and the driver is so rude.” “Dearest Donald,” she wrote her third son, “You have the good sense to know what your mother appreciates. The chicken was delicious.”

Now those of us in the twilight years of life when asked what we want for Christmas, will most likely give the age-old answer: nothing, we have all we need, or we will ask for good health, happiness or peace on earth.

But what will Santa Claus bring you tonight? Will it be what you really want or even more important, will it be what you really need? Can you remember what you got last Christmas?

Ever got a gift that you could not use or would not dare wear in public? You couldn’t wait for the stores to open the next morning so that you could return it. What’s the worst gift that you have ever received? Was it one of those chia pets that grow hair or that singing fish named Big Mouth Billy Bass?

Now let’s discuss the third and most serious question. What do you and I really need this Christmas? Over the years, Santa Claus has evolved as the one who has all the answers. He has come to reflect the hopes and desires of people all over the world. He’s a friend who cares enough to travel a long way against all odds and all kinds of weather to bring good gifts to good people. He’s a friend of children who never gets sick and never grows old.

However, as wonderful as Santa is, he can’t provide what we really need. For one thing, he’s only around once a year. When January’s winds chill our souls, he’s history. When December’s requests become February’s payments, Santa has left the mall. When the time for taxes arrive in April, Santa is still months from his next visit. After all, he only comes once a year.

And when he does come, though he gives much, he doesn’t take much away. He doesn’t take away the hurt of broken relationships, the burden of mistakes, or the anxiety of demands. He’s kind and quick and jolly, but when it comes to healing or sickness, Santa can’t cure us.

Now I don’t mean to sound like a scrooge or the Grinch, but what do you and I really need? To be honest most of the time we don’t know, but our Heavenly Father knows. He knew it over 2000 years ago when He sent His only Begotten Son to be born in a stable, to become one of us so that He could show us the way back to God and to save us by dying for our sins. On that beautiful and glorious night, angels declared His birth to shepherds on a lonely hill outside of Bethlehem. They announced the coming of the greatest gift in the world and to the world.

Did you know that God has a Christmas tree, but it’s not shaped like this one behind me. Instead, it’s shaped like this cross and there’s gifts around it for each of us tonight. As a matter of fact, there are seven gifts: forgiveness, grace (the undeserved love of God), salvation, hope, peace of mind and freedom from the guilt and the burdens of life. And finally, and most important, there’s love. God loves each and everyone of us. On Christmas Eve, God fulfilled the words of John 3:16-17 – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” Tonight, we celebrate this promise. All these gifts are freely given. The price has been paid in full; you’re not going to get a bill next month in the mail. All we have to do is open them.

There was a young couple who were getting married and wanted a special honeymoon. The bride reserved a room at a resort in the mountains. After the wedding, they got delayed by bad weather and arrived at the resort late at night. When they got to their room, it was not what they had expected. It was a tiny room with no view, no flowers, a cramped bathroom, and no bed, just a sleeper sofa. But they were so tired from the wedding and the trip that they just went to sleep.

However, the next morning, at the insistence of his new bride, the groom went downstairs to complain to the manager. After listening patiently to the angry groom for a few minutes, the manager asked: “Did you open the door in your room?” The groom was speechless and rushed back upstairs, and opened the door to what he thought was a closet. There, complete with fruit and chocolate baskets was a large state room with a great view. The point of the story is that each one of us needs to open the door tonight and accept these beautiful and wonderful gifts from our Father.

My wife Judy gave me a list a few years ago entitled “Why Jesus is even better than Santa Claus?” Let me read it to you:

Santa lives at the North Pole … Jesus is everywhere.

Santa rides in a sleigh … Jesus rides on the wind and walks on water.

Santa comes once a year ... Jesus is an ever-present help.

Santa comes down your chimney … Jesus stands at your door and knocks, and then enters your heart when invited.

You have to wait in line to see Santa … Jesus is as close as the mention of His name.

Santa lets you sit on his lap … Jesus lets you rest in His arms.

Santa doesn’t know your name, all he can say is “Hi little boy or girl, what’s your name?” … Jesus knew our name before we were born.

Not only does He know our name, He knows our address too. He knows our history and our future and He even knows how many hairs are on our heads.

Santa has a belly like a bowl of jelly … Jesus has a heart of love.

Santa says: “You better not cry” … Jesus says: “Cast all your cares on me for I care for you.”

Santa’s little helpers make toys … Jesus makes new life, mends wounded hearts, repairs broken homes and builds mansions.

Santa may make you chuckle but … Jesus gives you joy that is your strength.

While Santa puts gifts under your tree … Jesus became our gift and died on a tree – the Cross.

Santa is great, but Jesus is everything we need.

We need to put Christ back in CHRISTmas; Jesus is still the reason for the season. So, when it comes to goodies and candy, rosy cheeks and red noses go to the North Pole. But when it comes to healing, forgiveness, happiness, freedom and a peace that passes all understanding, go to the Manger. Kneel beside the shepherds tonight, and open the door to your heart and experience the real gifts of Christmas. Experience God’s love, given just for you. May the love of God embrace you not only tonight, but every day of your life. Merry Christmas!