

The Most Valuable Gift

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening again, if you weren't here at the beginning. My name's Archie, pastor in training here. It is Christmas that's just around the corner, not Easter. Sorry about that. That is months away.

You don't need to worry about that at all. But Christmas is less than 10 days away now. So I hope that you have bought all your Christmas presents. I love Christmas. Don't you love Christmas? I know that it can be a difficult time, but there are lots of things to look forward to, aren't there, about Christmas Day.

What is it that you look forward to most? Maybe it's time with family, too much food. Maybe you have a favorite Christmas film. Maybe your family have a really specific tradition that's really strange, but you just love.

In so many ways, I think Christmas can be a wonderful day. And let's be honest, this is true of me. One of the things that we love about Christmas is all the gifts that we get, isn't it?

If we're really honest about it, I wonder what the best Christmas gift that you've ever received is. Maybe you can picture it. Think about the best gift you've ever received. As you do that, partly just to make that gift seem much better, I'm going to tell you about the worst Christmas present that I ever received.

[1 : 09] I was about 14 years old. Big extended family Christmas. All the cousins were there. It's time to open the presents. We're sent to the tree. All the kids are sent to the tree to get one present at a time.

And naturally, the first thing I do is find the biggest one that I can with Archie written in capital letters across the top. I'm really excited. I rip it open. And, well, it was a toy drum.

You know, this sort of thing looks like a kind of old military band drum made of cheap plastic. It was rubbish. I was 14 years old. Like, I actually played the drums. I had a proper drum kit. Was this some kind of joke?

And, of course, polite boy that I was, I waltzed up to the aunt who had given it to me. I did my absolute best to seem as grateful as I possibly could. And she literally burst out laughing in my face. That's not for you. It's for your cousin. See, I have a cousin, 10 years younger than me, also called Archie. He was four years old. A great gift for him. Ridiculously embarrassing. A rubbish gift for me.

[2 : 11] And that ruined one of my favorite things about Christmas. Because, at its best, receiving gifts is great, isn't it? It's wonderful. One of the reasons that getting gifts is so good, it's not just about getting stuff that we want.

It's because it's one of the ways that we know that somebody really cares about us. And it's one of the ways that we show that we love other people, too. And in some ways, I guess, the greater the gift, the greater the love.

Generally speaking, that's true in terms of how valuable something is. I expect my parents, despite everything that I've put them through, they do love me very much. I expect they'll get me a really very good gift for Christmas this year.

My sister-in-law, on the other hand, well, I'm hoping she'll get me something. It's true in terms of monetary value, but it's also true in terms of sentiment.

It might be that someone you love just doesn't have the cash to get you something valuable in that way. But I suspect some of the gifts that you've thought about, they might not have been valuable in terms of money, but they're nonetheless valuable because they were really thought through.

[3 : 17] Maybe they were even homemade or something like that. Whatever it is, and for whatever reason, in many ways, the greater the value of the gift, the greater the love. Well, the gift that we're here to talk about this evening, it is infinitely valuable.

I'm not even exaggerating when I say that. I'm not being hyperbolic. It is literally the most valuable thing in the universe. This gift that we read about in the Bible, here's what the Bible says.

This is that gift, the most valuable thing in the universe, eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And we're just going to spend the next 10, 15 minutes or so thinking about that statement. And as we do that, I guess we've got to begin at the start. Before we understand this gift, we've got to ask, well, what is sin?

And why are the wages of sin death? What do you think sin is then? This thing that the Bible says is so bad that it leads to death.

[4 : 28] Well, I think the way that the Bible talks about sin might actually surprise you. See, what the word sin does, it cuts right to the heart of what we're all like as humans. It's not simply a way to describe like a ledger book of all the things that we've done wrong.

Instead, it's a deep diagnosis of the condition of the human heart, of my heart, of your heart. Corrie just read this evening in Genesis chapter 3 for us.

And in many ways, that passage, it gets right to the heart of the center of this problem. Adam and Eve, they're given free reign over the garden. They can eat anything they like, they're told, except this one thing.

They can eat any fruit they like in this garden, except the fruit from this one tree. But then comes the temptation. Did you see it as Corrie read? The temptation at the heart of it all is this.

Did God really say? And this is what the human heart is like, just always asking that question. Did God really say? I think two ways, really, that we all ask that question.

[5 : 36] Maybe you're here this evening and you do believe in God. Maybe you even call yourself a Christian. But you're not so sure about all the things that the Bible says is bad.

Come to think of it, you're not sure about all the things the Bible says is good. You're asking that question, did God really say? And if you're here this evening and you don't believe in God at all, certainly not the God of the Bible anyway, you're not convinced that there will be any eternal justice. And so really you're asking the same thing. Did God really say? For if God does not exist, if this God doesn't exist, then of course he didn't really say.

This is the question at the heart of what the Bible calls sin. It's the default question of the human heart. You might think of it like this. Do you remember Augustus Gloop in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory?

Augustus, he's one of the kids who wins a golden ticket, the opportunity to visit Willy Wonka's amazing chocolate factory. And there's that scene in the, it's in both films. It's my favorite scene in both the films.

[6 : 40] It's an incredible scene. Right at the heart of the factory, there's this ridiculous room where everything is edible. And Willy Wonka, he takes all the kids into this room and he says, you can eat anything in this room you like.

The grass is made of candy. The trees are made of chocolate. You can literally eat anything you like. But you see the chocolate river that runs through the center of this room.

Do not drink from the chocolate river, he says. And what does Augustus Gloop do? He runs straight to the river and just begins to feast.

And in a way, this is kind of what sin does. That heart problem that we have as we question the goodness of what God has said, as we question his existence even.

Did God really say? It's a bit like this. If I tell you right now, don't touch your nose. Don't do it. Do not touch your nose. What do you all want to do?

[7 : 36] Yeah, right? And in a way, that's what sin does. Our hearts and desires, they're always questioning God and his goodness. And so just like Augustus Gloop, it ends up consuming us and we fall into it.

See what happens to Augustus? He questions the command and he drinks and he drinks and he drinks. And then what happens? He falls into the chocolate river. Consumed by his temptation. Carried away by his rebellion. As we think about the suffering and the hardships of life this evening, really this is what's at the heart of all of that.

And see, here's the truth of it. Our hearts are just constantly falling for that temptation. Did God really say? And then we're captured and consumed by our desire, just like Augustus Gloop.

That's what sin is. It's a deep diagnosis of the human heart. My heart, your heart. And there is a sense in which we have to pay for that.

[8 : 41] Here's the metaphor that the Bible uses. It's paying the wages of that. It's the thing it deserves, if you like. I guess we all understand how this works, even just in the last few weeks.

This is what wages are. As we've seen strikes on the news in healthcare and the postal service and the railways and in schools. Maybe that's even you, if you're striking. What are you doing? It's people fighting to get the wages that they deserve.

Well, what does our sin deserve? What do we deserve? I don't mean how much do we deserve to get paid. But in the great eternal scheme of things, does our sin, our heart problem, turned away from the God who has created us?

Or doesn't it require justice? Most religions have something to say about that question, and they tend to say something similar. They appeal to that, to our sense of justice.

They say what goes around comes around. If you tip the scales on the side of good enough, then you'll be all right. And in some ways, Christianity is no different. See what it says? The Bible says the wages of sin is death.

[9 : 46] That those who sin deserve death. That if you tip the scales on the side of good enough, or if you don't rather, then you won't be all right. That's justice, isn't it?

And see, if God is the loving creator of this universe, and our hearts are just naturally bent away from him, towards ourselves and our own desires, constantly questioning what he has said is good. Then in a world of justice, what goes around comes around. What do we deserve? Augustus Gloop, he disappears up the pipe, presumably never to be seen again. And in this verse, well, the wages of sin is death.

Now, of course, we will all die one day. I hope that's not news to you, but you are going to die one day. But death here, do you see it's contrasted with eternal life? And so it's an eternal payment for our sin.

That's what the wages of sin being death is. Now, I don't know about you, but I guess you're feeling pretty uncomfortable at this. Certainly, I'm uncomfortable saying it in many ways, because if this is the condition of the human heart, then we're in trouble, aren't we?

[10 : 52] But the story doesn't end there. See, this is how Christianity is unique. This is how it's different to all those other religions, because at its heart is this wonderful hope, this wonderful gift.

We heard about it in Isaiah chapter 9 from David just now, that the hope, a child that is to be born, who will reign in justice and in righteousness forever and ever.

And his coming is exactly what we celebrate at Christmastime. Why is that good news? Well, see what it says here in Romans chapter 6. The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

Think about that best Christmas gift that you've ever received. Picture it in your mind. Picture the love of the person who gave it to you. I'm certain that none of them compare to this gift.

The gift at the heart of Christmas is the gift of eternal life in him. It's incredible. And what it reflects, really, if it's true that the greater the gift, the greater the love, well, what it reflects is God's love for you.

[11 : 59] See here, I have a 10-pound note. How much is this worth? The answer is obvious, isn't it? It's worth 10 pounds. If I go like this with it and I scrunch it up, how much is it worth?

It's still worth 10 pounds, isn't it? If I threw it in a muddy puddle on the floor, if I stood on it, how much would it be worth? It's still worth 10 pounds, isn't it?

Why is it worth 10 pounds? Well, it's worth 10 pounds because a higher authority, in the case of money in this country, a higher authority, the Bank of England, says so.

And it's a bit like that with God. See, he values you. He cares about you. He loves you so much that despite all the wrinkles and the crinkles, despite all the sadness and the suffering and the mess and the mourning and the dirt and the disasters and the pain and the pride, despite our sinful hearts naturally turned away from him, always asking, did God really say?

Despite all of that, he loves you so much that he offers this, the free gift of eternal life in Jesus. And this just makes all the difference in the world.

[13 : 23] Even today, I mean, if you just look around you, I mean, no offense, but you're a pretty random group of people in the room, right? There are doctors and teachers and HR people and administrators and marketing wizards.

And we're all in this room together. We're going to share food together at the end of our service. And we meet like this every week here. And let's be honest, there is nowhere else in our modern world where such a random group of people get together in this way.

It's weird. Why do we do it? What do we have in common? Well, it's this gift that we've accepted eternal life in Christ Jesus, that he is our Lord.

It's an incredible life-changing gift. And so just before we finish, here's how that gift was made possible. In a few moments time, we're going to hear another reading from Philippians chapter 2. And really, it tells the story of Christmas, of a loving God who lowered himself from his heavenly throne to a lowly manger as a child. Joining us in all those ups and downs of life and who through life continued that downward journey of suffering, serving those around him in perfect obedience to his heavenly father, living the perfect life that we haven't lived.

[14 : 41] Obedient to God, even to the point of death, dying the death that we deserve to die, paying the wages of sin that you and I deserve to pay. But of course, and this is Easter, we'll get there.

He did not stay dead. He rose again. And so he can promise that we too shall rise with him to eternal life. This is the wonderful gift that we celebrate this Christmas.

Imagine how different Christmas could be for you this year if this was the gift that you received. We do not deserve it. There is nothing we can do to earn it.

It is a free gift. It is the most outrageously generous gift you could wish for from the most outrageously loving God you could imagine. Will you accept it this Christmas?

Maybe if it's a gift that you haven't accepted before, will you accept it tonight? Maybe you've decided recently that you would like to accept that gift. Maybe you've thought so for a while.

[15 : 40] Maybe you've decided even just as I've been speaking, if that's you, please don't do nothing about that. If that's you, tell a Christian friend or a family member. If you don't have one of those, that's fine. Just grab me or Graham.

We'd love to point you in the right direction. And equally, if you're still unsure about this gift, but you do think that you'd like to hear more, please don't be afraid to ask your questions.

Again, your friends, your family, or we'd love to chat these things through with you. And wherever you're at, whatever you think of this gift, as we sing and enjoyments, pies together and time together, do use this time this evening to dwell on this God who created you.

This God who loves you. And this God who offers you a free gift of eternal life with him this Christmas. Let me pray.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for Christmas. Lord, we thank you for how you have loved us.

[17 : 09] So much that you give us this gift of eternal life. Lord, I pray that you would help us to freely accept that gift. And that you would help us to live as those who have received it.

For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.