

How to Receive

Matthew 2:7–11 (NIV)

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” **9** After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Introduction. How many of you have already started your Christmas shopping? How many of you have finished your Christmas shopping? (Those people are just showing out, aren't they?)

It seems nearly impossible in our culture to separate the season of Christmas from giving and receiving of gifts. I imagine that nearly every family here this morning will have some kind of gift exchange during this season.

Of course if you are going to give gifts, you have to obtain them. This year it is expected that US Consumers will spend nearly \$1,000 each household for a total of some \$680 B. That is a lot of spending. In my household, I doubt a \$1,000 budget is large enough.

Do you struggle with knowing what to give to most of the people you buy for? What do you give to the person who has everything? I guess the good thing for people like me is 48% of us will give gift cards.

All of us know that Christmas is more than shopping, gift giving and gift receiving. Yet it is important to realize **gift-giving is deeply rooted in the biblical narrative of the Christmas story.** One of the strong themes of Matthew's birth story of Jesus is this matter of gift giving and receiving.

The Magi gifts.

Now for those of you who are liturgical and lectionary purists, reading and preaching from the story of the Magi coming to visit Jesus should not be used on this First Sunday in Advent. You know that this biblical story should be saved and told a few weeks after Christmas during Christian season of Epiphany. For those of you who have little idea what liturgical, lectionary and Epiphany means, it may not matter this story is told today.

Because we are so engaged in gift giving and receiving on our culture, it seems this is a good place to begin the season. Magi bring gifts to Jesus.

In many ways, **there is no story more unique to the Christmas tale of Jesus than the coming of the Magi.** You see these who came to visit Jesus are mystery visitors. Gospel readers who know the context understand these are a strange band of guests at the manger.

These Magi were probably people of a priestly cast of **Babylonian or Persian star gazers.** They studied the night heavens to see if they could find a clue of what was happening in the world or was going to happen they believed our what was going to happen was written in the stars. They were essentially astrologers. So when they saw a new light appearing in the western skies, they concluded it was the sign of the birth of a new Jewish king. Now the story of this is so common place for us, we hardly give it a second thought. But in reality it is rather odd. Essentially pagan star gazers come to find a new Jewish king and in the process their hearts are deeply touched by God.

When they arrived in Jerusalem and had an audience with the ruler of the Jewish territory, they quickly discovered he had no clue about this royal birth. They perceived something was amiss as they went looking for the child in the place where prophesy says he would be born. Then after they found him, they are warned not to return to Herod to tell him. Now if some said to us a star led them to a particular place and a dream told them what to do, we would look with suspicion on that person.

But there is something these guys did which we understand. **They brought gifts.** Now the gifts they brought demonstrate they were male magi. If they had been female they would have had sense to bring gifts appropriate for a baby – **Huggies, a blanket, clothes.** **But these guys brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. What could a baby do with these gifts?**

Many, who are smarter than I have suggested the gifts have deep theological meaning and who Jesus is and what lies ahead. **Gold is a gift fit for a king. Frankincense is a perfume used in worship that points to Jesus' divinity. Myrrh was a perfume used in embalming** – Jesus was born to die. Those thoughts are neat and help us to understand Jesus.

But for the person like me who likes practical gifts, these probably served a very important purpose. Later in the story we are told Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the coming wrath and jealousy of Herod. I imagine the Magi's gifts funded this trip of a blue collar carpenter and his family to escape to safety.

Posture of Receiving.

While I love this story and the power of the magi bringing gifts as an expression of worship of the new king, something I want to hear is missing. Maybe it is implied but Matthew did not include it. **We are not told how Joseph and Mary received their gifts.** How we receive gifts say as much about us as how we give gifts?

OK – in **all likelihood you will be given a gift this Christmas by a person for whom you did not give a gift.** What happens when you receive that gift from a person not on your shopping list? Does it make you feel badly that you did not get them a gift? Do you try to go out and buy them a gift quickly to reciprocate their gift? Or do you receive it with joy and thanksgiving?

I suspect many of us are more wired to be givers than receivers. We know the oft quoted verse of scripture: "It is more blessed to . . . (give) than to . . . (receive)." I tend to be a much better giver than a receiver.

Evidence of our often being poor receivers comes from this. Do you know the second busiest shopping day of every year? The day after Christmas. Many are taking those gift cards and spending them but most have something to return. Many of those simply did not like their gifts. I will not wear that brown sweater my sister bought me? (Often I am a rotten receiver.) So how should we receive gifts?

To the person gathered here who is able to understand the Christmas message of Christ, we know **the story of giving is more than what the Magi brought and what we buy and give to one another.** These are gifts of Christmas but they are not **the Gift of Christmas.** We know the true Gift comes from above, from God.

That most known NT passage, John 3:16 clearly tells us of this gift: **"For God so loved the world He gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."** Jesus is clearly the gift of Christmas, God's gift to us.

As this gift is unwrapped in scripture we see the richness. John said through Jesus there is **the hope of everlasting life.** Through Jesus, **death is conquered and we receive life beyond this mortal existence.** It is life that not **only lasts a long time but is everlasting.**

The thought of everlasting life in some situations may not seem like a great thing for those who have suffered greatly in this life. Living in continual pain is not hopeful thought. But the everlasting life described in scripture is one of great joy. **Paul wrote we can't even imagine what God has in store for those who love him.**

The NT description of this gift given in Jesus is like the **beautiful images of a kaleidoscope.** Which each slight turn is reveal another eye pleasing sight of beauty. John who shared about the gift of everlasting life also shared about another kind of life given in Jesus. He said Jesus **came to bring "abundant life."** That is not life in the sweet by and by but in the now, right here. Jesus offers us life that is full, meaningful and exciting.

The NT reveals this wonderful picture that in Jesus, **we are given victory in living in this present world.** Through Christ, **the darkness of our lives that haunts and overwhelms us is swallowed up in Christ's kingdom of light.** Together we share with **Christ this great inheritance.** As I reflect on this, I think of people who once were enslaved to addictions that were destroying their lives and they turned their lives and wills over to Jesus, they were set free. Some of those folks are seated near you today. God's gift to us in Christ is truly amazing.

Our Posture.

So how are we to receive The Gift of Christmas? What is to be our posture?

In reading Paul's writings that made it into the NT, it seems this Christ follower understood the magnitude of the Gift of Christmas and the Gift's impact on his life. He knew he had done nothing or could do nothing to earn this gift. It was freely given by God. Listen to his words and posture.

- **Romans 6:17–18 (NIV)** *But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin . . . You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*
- **1 Corinthians 15:56–57 (NIV)** *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- **2 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV)** *Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession.*
- **Colossians 1:12–14 (NIV)** — *Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. **13** For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, **14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

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Then there is this amazing summary from Paul:

- **2 Corinthians 9:15 (NIV)** *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

For Paul, the posture was one of gratitude. He gratefully accepted this gift he had been given in Christ. I believe Paul's posture is to be our posture – receive the gift with the deepest heartfelt gratitude. The neat part of God's gift is it keeps on giving so we keep receiving with gratitude. The more I realize what Christ offers, my heart is continually enriched.

This morning I invite you to watch the following video which tells the story of a little girl named Roza who received a gift from Operation Christmas Child. As you watch this story, imagine yourself to be Roza and the gift received to be The Christmas Gift. Can you receive the Gift with joy and gratitude?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5NGfGVzTRQ> (0:10-2:21)

Today we will gather around this table for communion. One of the names of the service of Communion is which comes from the Greek NT meaning to give thanks. When Jesus was at the table, he gave thanks for the bread and wine. The words we use before we receive is called "The Great Thanksgiving."

Celebrating the Eucharist is a posture of celebration in which we give thanks. We come humbly with open hands to receive the fullness of the gift Jesus offers. We come with gratitude. This morning I invite you to this table to receive the Gift of Christmas. I encourage you to come with gratitude.

There is a posture in receiving this gift – it is of hands turned upward. It is an act of humility of acceptance of the gift but is also a sign of thanks. I encourage you to come and receive in this manner.