

## Jesus Comes, Bearing Gifts: Here's the Secret to Complete Joy this Christmas!

A sermon based on Philippians 2:1-4.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Only two more days until you'll be disappointed, or, maybe only one more day if you're the family who opens presents on Christmas Eve. Did you ever have that feeling growing up? The most wonderful time of the year, and you were disappointed.

Why would that ever happen? Well, you remember you as a kid, don't you? About Thanksgiving time, you got the huge toy book in the mail, and what happened? You meticulously combed through the entire book – often two or three times. You composed this lavish list of everything you hoped – and maybe were even expecting – to get in those presents under the tree. You dreamed of the smile that wouldn't leave your face Christmas Day as you tore through all the gifts, and were able to check off all the items on your list. We're getting to experience that with Mara this year!

And then Christmas Day came, and your hopes began to diminish as you opened your first present...socks. But the next one was a bigger box...new shoes. That one's got potential...a hand-knitted sweater from Grandma. And what set in? Disappointment, right? These weren't on your list!

Pastor, stop being such a Grinch! Ok, ok, you got me, I'm sure you got at least a couple of the things on your list you really wanted, and you were happy for it. But did you get everything? Probably not. And sometimes, it's hard not to be a little disappointed, isn't it? When you had your heart set on something in particular and you didn't get it.

As adults, we still have that list...probably not filled with toys anymore. But maybe it's the expectation of having a few peaceful days off of work, a holiday season without the family fighting for once, an end to all the unexpected bills and unwelcomed ailments. And, again, it's disappointing when those wishes don't come to fruition, isn't it.

Well, instead of going through this Christmas feeling disappointed once again, or, getting through all the presents and forcing a smile, like you're excited about what you got when you're really not...or, going a step further, and spending the rest of this Christmas – and for that matter, the rest of your life – with real, complete joy and not the disappointments you've become accustomed to feeling because of all that's wrong with this world and this life, I want to share a secret to how you can have complete joy.

Actually it's the Apostle Paul's secret...and it's not so much of a secret. Listen again to his words from Philippians 2, ***“Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”***

The secret to complete joy is ***“being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”*** Paul's joy, or rather, God's joy is complete when we are of the same mind, when we have the

same love. Guess whose mind and love he'd like us to sync up with? If you can't get it, how about listening to the next few verses, "***Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.***"

What brings God joy is when we are in tune with God's will and his commands in everything – our thoughts, our words, our actions. What brings God joy is when we live humble, unselfish lives, mirroring the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, whose life was all about unselfish giving and service.

Would that be a good characterization of your life?

You know, let's talk about giving in a broader sense, the type of life we live and give to God. Like, when you make decisions, who are you making decisions for? Is your first thought, "What would God want me to do?" Is it "How will this impact someone else?" Or does it tend to be "What's in my best interest? What'll bring me the most joy?"

Like your spouse, your co-worker, or your friend did something that drives you crazy, annoys you like nothing else, like returned your car on empty when you have to rush to get to work because you're already running late, or they forgot, again, to bring their wallet when out to eat, so you have to cover them, again.

And you know the patience God would want you to have. You know the word of forgiveness that person would love to hear after a heartfelt apology. You also know how good it feels to throw a dart, to say what you know is going to cause hurt feelings or is going to start an argument. Deep down, you want them to feel the brunt of your frustration – but, hey, you feel better.

Which option do you usually choose? And this is just a couple of endless examples. But again, which option do you usually choose? What's best for me, right?

What does that gift look like to God? What does the gift of your life look to God? What does the gift of your service to God and to others – or lack thereof - look like to God? Does it bring him joy?

Or, let's talk about giving in its more narrow sense. I mean, at Christmas, we find joy in giving gifts, don't we? Have you ever done a gift exchange before? We do a couple every Christmas, with my siblings, with Becky's family. And it's fun...when it works the way it's supposed to. Do you know how? Everyone gives a gift. Everyone sticks to the price point. Everyone buys something either meaningful or from the other person's wish list.

Well, think of it this way...God gives us all gifts – everything we have. What do you give him in exchange? Does God become the forgotten person in the exchange...he gets nothing? Does he get short-changed? Does he get your meaningful gifts or leftovers?

I saw a picture on Facebook a number of months ago where it tried to put Christian stewardship – our giving – into perspective. I thought it was rather good, so it only makes too much sense that I couldn't find it when I wanted to reference it again. But I do remember one point, along the lines of you usually have no problem dropping \$20 on a few drinks on Saturday night when you're out with your friends, or you have no issue spending \$20 on coffee throughout the week, or, in keeping with the season, paying \$20 on a couple of stocking stuffers for one of your loved ones is a drop in the buck, yet that same \$20 is so painful to give as an offering at church on Sunday...feels like a huge dent in your wallet...or, a huge, generous gift to God. Think about that.

When it comes to that kind of giving or even our living in general, are we of one mind with God? Is our attitude like that of Jesus? Or are we more like a Grinch, in it for “me”?

You see, the two can't exist side by side. You can't want the joy of salvation while craving the joy that comes from gratifying your sinful nature. Life doesn't work that way. Like, you can't enjoy eating all the junk food you want and then also enjoy good health. You can't enjoy large amounts of leisure time and also enjoy being excellent at something, like being a great basketball player. Certain joys cannot exist with each other. We can't find joy in living for Jesus and being like-minded with him when we're so focused on living for me first. We can't expect the real, complete joys of heaven when we show our main concern and top priority is about finding joy in this life and in its pleasures for me. All that can only lead to disappointment in the end.

Thank God we get to enjoy a different kind of gift exchange this this Christmas...and for life.

Here's what makes God's joy complete. The book of Corinthians describes this exchange, ***“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.”***

In one half of the exchange, God went above and beyond any set spending limit. Where we might give God our spare expenses, he spared no expenses on us, ***“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.”***

God has given us the gift of Jesus, whom God sent down from heaven...Jesus, ***“who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.”***

Jesus, who had no sin, yet God made him sin for us...the worst sinner of all time on the cross, where the other half of the exchange took place. There God took all the disappointments – the time's we've disappointed him with our sins, including our lack-luster gifts – and he gave them to Jesus, who suffered death in our place. And in exchange, we got Jesus' righteousness, his perfection, his reward of heaven. Kind of a lopsided exchange there, wouldn't you say? Yet Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is what made God's joy complete...as it took away the disappointment and the obstacle of our sins, making everything right between us and God.

That's not fair. But that's grace. I think of it like parents giving gifts to their children. Their joy is in giving the gifts, seeing the child light up as they open the present and rejoice in what they've been given. If only you would see the parent's smile in that moment...probably just as big, if not bigger.

***“For the joy set before him, [he] endured the cross,”*** is what Hebrews tells us. As hard as it was, I'm sure, for the Father to send Jesus to the cross, it brought both the Father and Jesus joy...the joy of winning and giving forgiveness for our sins.

And now, not only does God find joy in you and me with our sins forgiven. He finds joy in the gifts we bring to him.

Again, we can talk about our giving in the broader sense, how now, forgiven, comforted, and motivated by the selfless love of Jesus, the way we live – the way we make decisions – is turned on its head...I want to be like-minded with God. I want to do what brings Jesus joy first. I want to do what's going to be in

the best interest of others, and I can put “me, myself, and I” last. That kind of service brings complete joy to God and you and me.

Or, we can talk about our giving in the narrower sense – our offerings. Again, forgiven, comforted, and motivated by the selfless love of Jesus, our giving starts here (in the heart). You know how the Grinch who stole Christmas ends, don’t you? The Grinch saw how joyful the residents of Whoville still were, in spite of having no presents, decorations, anything, and what happened? His heart “great 3 sizes that day.”

Jesus grows your heart with a longing to be generous. The God who loves the cheerful giver makes you cheerful in your giving. And as you find joy in giving – even in your offerings, that kind of giving puts a smile on God’s face...not because of the amount (and remember, a heart motivated by the love of Jesus won’t be satisfied with how little I can get away with giving in order to soothe my conscience). Your giving puts a smile on God’s face and brings him joy because you think enough of him and love him enough to make him a priority...to make him, who spared no expense for you, the recipient of your finest gifts.

You want the secret to real, complete joy this Christmas. Understand the heart of the giver. Today, I love getting socks. I always need more. The knitted sweater shows Grandma cares for me enough to spend hours making something personal instead of spending five seconds clicking the “buy now” link on Amazon.

The joy of giving starts with God, who gave up his most precious treasure – his own Son – for you and for your forgiveness. So, now friends, we will strive to be like-minded with Christ and have the same love as the Father as we find joy in giving...in our lives of service to God and others...in our giving our very best gifts and offerings to God. And in that, I guarantee, you’ll never be disappointed. We’ll give and live with complete joy...this Christmas...and the rest of our days. Amen.