

# *Presents under the Tree*

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

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I Corinthians 1:3–9

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The tree is up, the decorations are out, the candles are set and trimmed, and here at our church ... “it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas” — or a little bit more.

I’m grateful to those who came out Friday afternoon to help set things up here in the sanctuary, in the narthex, in the hallways, in the lounge, in the fellowship hall. With so many hands, the work went so fast, the transformation of our space to reflect our anticipation of Christmas.

And it’s not only here. Other places, too, have been putting up decorations. Living rooms are making room for trees and crèches. Houses are sporting holiday lights and lawn ornaments. And the malls ... well of course the malls have jumped in big time, installing elaborate holiday displays, creatively and intentionally designed to put shoppers in a good mood, a festive mood, a mood conducive for staying long in the Christmasy emporiums to buy lots and lots of Christmasy presents.

A holiday display you’ll see in many malls, and even in stores of all sizes, is of a Christmas tree with presents. Very nice. Sometimes these trees are huge. Sometimes they’re just a normal kind of big. Never are they “Charlie Brown Christmas trees,” twiggy and scrawny and sad. These are works of art, and so are the presents underneath the tree, each perfectly wrapped in beautiful paper and adorned with fine bows.

But here’s the thing about those Christmas displays: the presents are not presents. They’re props. They’re for show. They contain no gifts. There is nothing of value in those boxes. They will never be opened, enjoyed, shared, celebrated. Actually, they’re not meant to be unwrapped. You’d get in trouble if you tried, if you sauntered up to the display and tore the paper off one of the boxes!

(If you ever do this, don’t blame me.)

Try as I might, I can never wrap presents so they look anywhere near as good as those packages under the tree at the mall. I think I need lessons in wrapping presents, from a kind and patient teacher. (Any volunteers?)

Yet the presents I do manage to wrap (rather than just throw into a nice bag with a bunch of pastel paper), and those that others in my family have wrapped, they are not going to *stay* wrapped. But that’s the point, right? They aren’t *supposed* to stay wrapped. What’s important about them is what’s *in* them. We call them “presents,” but really they just *contain* the presents for others.

And then once the packages are opened, what then? Do we put the gifts back in their packages? Re-wrap them? Hide them?

No. We give each other gifts so we’ll use them, enjoy them, share them. Maybe even (in the case of food or drink) to use them *up*. It would be a poor use of a gift not to use it for its

intended purpose. It would show one to be ungrateful or inconsiderate of the giver, who is eager to see what becomes of the presents under the tree.



In the Bible passage I read a few minutes ago, the Apostle Paul begins a letter to a church he had founded and used to lead with some really nice words. Among those nice words are these: “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift....”

Wow! Not only is that nice. That’s something. These friends of Paul’s must have been something else. They must have been truly exceptional. After all, they were “not lacking in any spiritual gift.”

So I suspect that many of us would hear this, and think, “I’m out.” A good number of us would understand Paul to be speaking to spiritual giants, to truly holy people, *and not to us*.

The thing is, there’s a whole lot that comes after this, the whole rest of a very long letter. And I can assure you, what fills up that very long letter is not an unending stream of compliments. Actually, even *right* after this passage, if we were to keep reading, we’d find out that the church to which Paul was writing was —

hmm, what’s the word? —

a *mess*.

There was conflict.

There were disagreements.

There was envy,  
and unfairness,  
and injustice.

There were power dynamics.

There were rivalries.

There were cliques.

There were scandals,  
and the covering up of scandals.

Hey, it sounds like a church!

I don’t mean that in a rude way. I mean, actually, that this seems familiar to me, it seems that Paul is talking to a real church with real problems, and because of that what he says here with these “nice” words, it’s all both striking and encouraging to me.

Because Paul writes a letter to a church he knew and loved, a church with problems, big problems, a church that at times acted in ways that made him proud, and at other times made him very sad, a church that sometimes behaved in a way that fit the good news of the risen and reigning Lord Jesus, and yet at other times did things (even to each other) that were in shocking contrast to that good news.

*And yet* Paul begins by saying how he always gives thanks to God for these friends of his, and that they do not lack any spiritual gift.

I find this stunning.  
I find this encouraging.  
For it wasn't to the perfect that he said these "nice" things. It was to the flawed.  
It wasn't to those who had arrived, but to those who were still on the way.  
Which tells me *that Paul would say it to us, too.*



Now it's important to see quite clearly what Paul does here. He tells them that they are lacking no spiritual gift. And then he spends the rest of the letter urging them to use those gifts, to live in a way that fits with who Jesus is and who Jesus wants them to be, making clear very often that they have *not* been living that way.

So, obviously, he's not complimenting them. By saying this nice thing — "you are not lacking in any spiritual gift" — and then moving on right away to the *other* things he says, he's wanting them to feel some shock at the contrast between the gifts they've been given and how they in fact have been using them.

It's as if they have these pretty, wrapped presents under the tree. And yet, there they sit:

untouched,  
unopened,  
ignored,  
neglected.

And he wants them to rip the wrapping paper off those packages. He wants them

to tear open the boxes  
and take out what's inside  
with childlike shrieks of delight.

He wants them to enjoy those presents with an enthusiasm that will delight the Giver, as the Giver surely intends.

That they do not is a problem. And it's a problem that Paul spends a lot of time in this letter addressing.

He wanted them to understand that they were gifted.

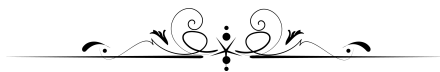
He wanted them to know that they were blessed.

He wanted them to understand that in Jesus Christ they had everything they needed to be the kind of people they were meant to be.

He wanted them to get it that they had been called into a reality far bigger than themselves.

He wanted them to know that God truly had given them the capacity to point to Jesus in everything they said and did.

And the same can be said of us.



But I think that we don't believe it. Not really. Not deeply and broadly.

I'd say that we are not the kind of people who show a lively and enthusiastic appreciation that God has indeed blessed us with all the spiritual gifts we need to be the church God wants us to be.

Instead, we tend to focus on what we do *not* have. Instead, we obsess about what we lack. In contrast to the rich abundance we've received from God, for some reason our thoughts dwell on our poverty.

Don't we here at this church usually act as if we are without any spiritual gifts? Don't we usually, in effect and by default, deny that we have within us the power to bear witness to Christ in creative and effective and life-changing ways?

It is not really humility that prompts such denial. It is not modesty.

Let's not kid ourselves.

It's doubt.

It's spiritual disobedience.

It's ignorance: of scripture, of ourselves, of God.

It's fear: of losing ourselves, of the unknown, of a deeper encounter with the Holy Three in One who is *always* more than what we can imagine.

Getting beyond all these, or through these, or becoming something new by these — the doubt and disobedience and ignorance and fear — it's right before us, as near as the claim of God on our lives and the tug of God on our hearts.

And even though it takes effort —

in prayer,  
and repentance,  
and study,  
in worship,  
and service,  
and deeds of mercy —

I am comforted by and am convinced of the truth that *God* has done the heavy lifting, and that God continues to do it.

For truly what our loving Lord desires is for us to see how we are not lacking in any spiritual gift, and that our giftedness enables us to live our lives in ways

that point to Jesus,  
that reflect his love,  
that share his blessing,  
that convey his truth,  
that join him in his work:  
healing the sick,  
forgiving the sinner,  
welcoming the stranger,  
feeding the hungry,  
clothing the naked,  
establishing justice,  
overturning injustice.

The Lord Jesus wants us to see that we have these gifts. We wants us to see: there they are! — those beautifully wrapped presents under the tree! And he wants us to rip the wrapping paper off those packages. He wants us

to tear open the boxes  
and take out what's inside with childlike shrieks of delight  
and enjoy those presents with an enthusiasm that will delight him, the  
Giver,  
as the Giver surely intends.



My friends, I want us to understand that we are gifted.  
I want us to know that we are blessed.  
I want us to understand that in Jesus Christ we have everything we need to be the kind of people we are meant to be.  
I want us to get it that we have been called into a reality far bigger than ourselves.  
I want us to know that God truly has given us the capacity to point to Jesus in everything we say and do.  
Truly, God is eager to see what becomes of the presents under our tree.