

"OUR GIFT TO GOD"

I don't know how many of you ever watch the Jackie Gleason show on TV on Saturday nights. Last night's show was delightful... and somewhat satirical... about this matter of the Christmas gift list. Gleason

INTRODUCTION

Is there anyone that we have forgotten to include on our Christmas gift list? That question probably will be asked in a great many homes between now and the 24th of December. And the answer will undoubtedly result in a lot of last minute shopping. Have we forgotten anyone?

WHAT ABOUT GOD?

What about our gift to God? You say - but that's a childish question. Perhaps only a child would think of putting God's name at the top of the list for Christmas presents. Children have a way of raising some profound theological questions. Quite naturally and simply, they bring forth problems and questions that we have tucked away in a corner of our minds under a load of pseudo-sophistication. Tell them that God has given us this wonderful world in which to live, that he has given them life and food and parents and clothing and a home. Tell them that at Christmas he gave us the infant Jesus. And then, isn't it natural for them to say: "What shall we give to God?"

And when you stop to think about it, they are asking a question that lies behind the whole story of religion from the most primitive sacrifice on the heathen altar to the dedicated life of the modern saint. They're asking a question that you and I may very well have wondered about from time to time. The church exhorts us to give to God. What does that mean? What can we give to the Almighty, the source of all that is. It reminds us of that familiar question that stares at us from the pages of the magazine: "What shall I give to the One who has everything?"

A GUIDELINE

What can we give to God? I think we can find an answer to this if we reflect upon the different kinds of gifts that we bestow upon one another here on earth. Let me suggest three kinds of gifts to you that people often give.

PRESENT WITH A PURPOSE

There's one kind of gift which I hope none of you are considering giving. It's what you call the "present with a purpose" gift. This kind of gift is given with the object of winning favor, of persuading the recipient to think kindly of the giver and hopefully do something for him. We smile when we think of the more harmless forms that this can take, like that of the boy who remembers to send a Christmas gift in plenty of time to his rich uncle. However, it's no smiling matter when it invades our public life. For this kind of gift we have invented an ugly name. We call it payola. It used to be called simply bribery. It raises some very serious questions of business ethics.

Now it's incredible that anyone should think of making this kind of gift to God and yet history can provide us with many examples of religious payola - the attempt by human beings to corrupt the Almighty, to persuade the Almighty to grant favors or overlook sins, in return for what we offer. We find the Old Testament prophets were continually castigating the worshippers of their day for imagining that their sacrifices would ensure them of the favor of God, no matter how they behaved. It's easy to slip into this way of thinking and to imagine that there is something we can give God that will persuade him to take up our cause or shield us from the consequences of our sins. This kind of present with a purpose should be ruled out of our mind.

I think of two people described in the Bible for us who presented love gifts. One was the young woman who burst into the room where Jesus was sitting with his friends and who broke an alabaster box of precious ointment and poured it over his feet. It probably represented her greatest treasure, but she gave it away in one vast gesture of affection. And the other was the old woman who slipped into the Temple offering box two little coins worth less than a penny. She caught favor in the eyes of our Lord.

We are growing in our understanding of the Christian Gospel when we learn that there are love gifts we can offer to God. To think only in terms of "duty gifts" to God and the church means that we have not really heard and responded to the glad tidings of the Gospel. The good news is not that God is just and good and merciful and that he expects a gift of justice and goodness and mercy from us. That is true, but that is not the heart of the Gospel. The Gospel is that God "so loved the world....that he gave his only Son".

At a time when he had sustained the loss of his only son in the war, Sir Harry Lauder related the following incident: "A man came to my dressing room in a New York Theater and told of an experience that had recently befallen him. An American towns any household that had given a son to the war was entitled to place a star on the window pane. A few nights before he came to see me, this man was walking down a street in New York accompanied by his son. The boy became interested in the lighted windows of the houses and clapped his hands when he saw a star. As they passed house after house, he would say, "Look daddy, there's another house that has given a son. And there's another. There's a house with two stars. There's a house with no stars."

"At last they came to a break in the houses. Through the gap could be seen the evening star shining brightly in the sky. The little fellow caught his breath. 'Oh look daddy' he cried. 'God must have given his son, for He has got a star in his window'. 'Indeed he has' said Sir Harry Lauder in repeating the story. It took the clear eyes of a little child to discover that the very stars repeat the glorious truth that "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son" - to live our life, to die our death, and to raise us up with him to a new and thankful communion with the Father.

This is the heart of the Gospel. This was the news that startled and thrilled the ancient world. This was the news that prompted the people of the first century to give their lives in return. This was the news which caused Paul, the Apostle, to cry out: "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift". Unspeakable to be sure - for this gift of God cannot be analyzed in speech or adequately expressed in words. We have to feel it, experience it, sing it, live it. It was this news that caused Paul Carlson, a modern disciple, to give his life for his faith in Africa. And when God's gift to us truly takes hold and touches our hearts - no matter how, no matter where - then there is a spontaneous response of our souls in the love gifts of loyalty and allegiance. What can you give God?

LET US PRAY

Loving Father, from whom cometh down every good and perfect gift, as we come to thy Table this hour we praise Thee for the greatest gift of all.

We look to the manger and join the angel song.
We look to the healer and thank thee for his reconciling power.
We look to the Teacher and rejoice in the words of life.
We look to the Cross and are humbled by that amazing love.

May this glad and joyous season, O God, be sanctified for us by the simple things that Christ has touched -

the happiness of children...
the exchanging of gifts...
the care of the aged...
the restoring of friendships..
the relief of need...
the gaily of goodwill...

Send thy light into the dark corners of our world -

that fears may be abated...
hatreds melted...
violence curbed....

Draw the weak and the lonely into the circle of thy strength and companionship, and inspire us all to share with others the good things thou hast given to us.

We ask this in the name of the Christ Child.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

COMMUNION It is the custom of this church to observe the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of each month. We like to remind our worshippers that the Table of the Lord is open to all who are sincerely trying to grow in their understanding of the will of God and the ways of the Christian life. And we would invite all of you to receive the Sacrament here this hour, and trust that the time for you may be an occasion of spiritual re-dedication and renewal.

WELCOME We welcome the visitors worshipping with us this morning. We hope that we may have an opportunity to greet each of you personally following the service - either at the door or at the coffee hour. We call upon you to sign one of our Guest Books so that we may have a record of our visit. And should business or pleasure bring you.....

MEETINGS The announcements are listed for you in the bulletin. I would ask you to read and review what is written there carefully before you depart.

There is one announcement, one paragraph, that I would underscore in your thinking. I would say a word about the Every Member Financial Canvass which is in progress, which we hope to be able to complete this next week. We can do this if we have your cooperation.

The results thus far have been most encouraging. We are two thirds of the way toward our goal. We have had two thirds of the anticipated response from the membership of this congregation. We still have some 50 or more persons from whom we hope to hear, and it would be most helpful to us to receive word from you this coming week.

The Finance Commission has put a great deal of time and effort into this program in your behalf. A great many hours of hard work have gone into the Canvass thus far. And your thoughtful cooperation and response makes their task that much easier.

If you have not yet responded, may we hear from you.

JESUS SAID: "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.

It would be most helpful if we can eliminate follow up letters, calls and visits on you in your home.

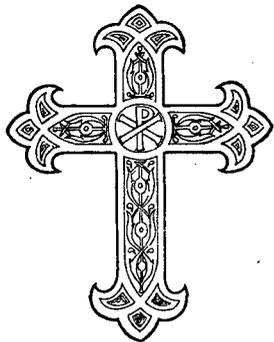
I don't know how many of you ever watch the Jackie Gleason show on TV on Saturday nights. Occasionally I turn it on...

Last night's show was delightful....and somewhat satirical....especially the act or scene dealing with the Christmas gift list.

It had Jackie and his wife in the living room of their home reviewing a six page Christmas gift list...that his wife had put together.....everyone from elevator operators to garbage men....even the new boy that had just come to serve as messenger in his office. He turned out to be the boss's son, and as Gleason put it, next Christmas he might be a vice president.

It was delightful....and it reminded me of something that happened last Christmas... the day before Christmas when the three men who work for the Sanitation department and take away the trash from in front of the church came up to my hide-a-way study to ask for their Christmas gift.....and then a few hours later, I got the best mail service I've had all year when the postman brought it right up to my desk in my study.

What about this whole matter of our Christmas gift list.....is there anyone...



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THE DUTY GIFT

Fortunately, few of the gifts that are moving across the country at this time are of this kind. A great many of the gifts given this Christmas will probably fall into the category of what one might term "duty gifts". That's not the most attractive label to put on those gaily decorated packages that are exchanged at Christmas - but I think you will know what I mean. There are people to whom we ought to give a present - not that we don't want to, but there would be something wrong if we didn't. We have a sense of obligation. We try to find out what they might want and we try to give them pleasure. We're not flattering them or trying to influence them. We just do it because it's the right thing, the proper thing.

I wonder if there is any "duty gift" that we can and ought to make to God? He has everything, we say. But has he? Has he got from you and from me the sort of straight, decent, upright life that he has the right to expect? He has made us to be his children, not his puppets; in so doing, he has given us freedom of choice, the freedom to choose one way or another. One of the prophets of old put it this way:

"Wherewithal shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God?" (In other words, what kind of gift can I make). "Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?"

Then comes the answer:

"He hath showed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of Thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God"

Here then is a gift we can give him: a life that is nearer to his design. This is our "duty gift". This is our obligation. There's little use in saying that we believe in God if we run our lives entirely according to our own selfish desires. And we cannot fulfill our duty gift just by some formal religious observance once a week for one hour. The gift must be found in the total ordering of our lives - Monday through Sunday - doing, justly, loving mercy, walking humbly. And this means being honest in our dealings, in our relationships, treating others with consideration and understanding, and not feeling in the least proud or self-satisfied about it.

THE LOVE GIFT

The present with a purpose gift. The duty gift. The third gift that we give is the most wonderful gift of all. The gift that means more than any other gift is what we call the "love gift" - the gift that is purely and simply an expression of care, of devotion, of love. It is the gift that is spontaneous and symbolic. A "love gift" can be something elaborate and costly, or it can be something as intrinsically worthless as a strip of cloth with some crude stitches on it such as a child makes for a parent. The cost doesn't matter. The material value is not significant. The spiritual value is beyond calculation. With every love gift, there goes a portion of the giver.

I think of two people described in the Bible who offered love gifts. Remember them. One was the young woman who burst into the room where Jesus was sitting with his friends and who brokera n alabaster box of precious ointment and poured it over his feet. It probably represented her greatest treasure; she gave it away in one vast outpouring of affection. And the other was the little old woman who slipped into the offering box of the Temple two little coins worth less than a penny. She, too, caught favor in the eye of our Lord.

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And when God's gift to us truly touches our hearts and takes hold of our lives - no matter how, no matter where - then there is a spontaneous outpouring of our souls in the love gifts of loyalty and allegiance.

Our gift to God? - to Him who is the source of all that is? A love gift of yourself. Give him yourself: your love, your loyalty, your life.