

Christmas Gifts

Titus 2:11-14

As all of us know, Christmas is a season for giving and receiving. When I think back over my life and my many Christmases, a handful of special presents come immediately to my mind. I remember quite vividly the Wild West choo-choo train given to me when I was three. A few drops of oil down its chimney and it would billow great white clouds of smoke. I remember, too, the small bone-handled penknife given to me when I was about nine, and the Huffy stingray spyder bike I received when I was eleven or twelve. Precious memories; special gifts! But the greatest gift of all is the gift of Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." (Jn. 3:16)

Indeed, Jesus is the gift all the world was waiting for. When Adam and Eve first fell into sin, God promised that one of Eve's offspring would crush Satan's head. (Gn. 3:15) When God called Abram to become father of the Jewish nation, God promised that one of his offspring would bring blessing to the world. (Gn. 22:18) Looking down the long tunnel of time, the prophets foresaw the coming of this promised offspring. Perhaps Isaiah saw his coming best; for Isaiah said, "(U)nto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." (Is. 9:6)

Finally, the appointed time arrived and Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. The gospel writers record the details of Jesus' holy birth. Luke says it best: "(Mary) brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." (Lk. 2:7-11)

Yes, Jesus is the gift all the world was waiting for. And like a package containing multiple presents, Christ came bearing three great gifts. Titus 2:11-14 tells us what they are. They are the gifts of saving grace, training grace, and eternal grace in glory!

Speaking of Jesus' coming, Titus 2:11 says, "...the grace of God has appeared." You see, God's grace has appeared in Jesus Christ. But what is grace? Grace is the unmerited favor of God. It is God's goodness given to those who are not worthy to receive it. And so Jesus is the gift of God's great grace. We are not worthy to receive him, for he is holy and we are not, but he is given to us nonetheless. And as I said, he came bearing three great gifts of God's great grace.

The first gift is the gift of saving grace. Titus 2:11 says, "...the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." And all of us need salvation, whether we know it or not! We need to be saved from God's righteous judgment on our unrighteous ways. For the Bible says all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. (Rm. 3:23) And the wages of sin is death. (Rm. 6:23) And it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment. (Heb. 9:27) But Jesus came to save us from God's righteous judgment upon our unrighteous ways. For the Bible says God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. (2 Cor. 5:19) You see, Jesus came to save us from the coming judgment and bring us back to God. Yes, he's the great Reconciler! He came to reestablish a relationship of love between us and our Maker.

In one of his many books, author Stephen Brown tells a wonderful story about a young couple that illustrates the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. According to Brown, this couple was very young when they married; she was nineteen and he was only twenty years of age. Six years and three kids later, the bloom was off the rose. The wife decided she couldn't take any more dirty dishes or dirty diapers so one day she simply walked away. Every now and then she called to check on the children but she refused to come home even when her husband begged her to return.

Then after many days of separation, the husband hired a private detective to look for his wife. Through hard work and careful investigation, the detective finally traced her to a rundown hotel up in Des Moines, Iowa. Upon hearing this, the husband packed a bag, put his children with a neighbor, and took a bus to Des Moines. You can imagine how he felt when he knocked on her door, she opened it, and he came face to face with his lost but much loved wife. For a brief moment, he looked at her and she looked at him, and then she fell apart in his arms. This time, when he asked her to come home, she tearfully agreed. Later, he asked her, "Why wouldn't you tell me where you were when you called to check on the children? You knew I loved you. Why wouldn't you come home?" Through her tears she replied, "Before (you came), your love was just words. But now I know how much you love me because you came (to get me)."¹

"Now I know how much you love me because you came to get me!" My friends, God came to get us in Jesus Christ. You see, we're a lot like that woman. We have turned our backs on God. The Bible says, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way." (Is. 53:6) Yes, we have turned our backs on God. And God sent the prophets to call us back to himself. But he had to send his Son to show us the real depths of his love. Yes, God sent his Son to reconcile us to himself. As Titus 2:14 says, "(Christ) gave himself for us – on the Cross – that he might redeem us – or buy us back – from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own..." A people of his own! Yes, God sent Jesus to bring us back to himself and to make us his own special people!

So Jesus came into the world with a very simple message: "God loves you and wants you back! Won't you come home?" My friend, how have you responded to that invitation? There's no telling what would have happened to that woman had she stayed in that seedy hotel without any decent means of support, but it wouldn't have been good. And nothing of eternal good can ever come to us if we refuse Jesus' gracious offer – his saving offer – to be reconciled with God. My friend, have you been reconciled with God? Jesus came at Christmas with the gift of saving grace to save us and restore us to a right relationship with God. Have you received that gift? You can! All you need to do is say: "Jesus, save me and reconcile me to God." And he will! That's why he came!

Yes, Jesus brings us the gift of saving grace. In addition, he brings us the gift of training grace. If we accept his saving grace then he immediately enrolls us in the academy of his training grace. Titus 2:11-12 describes this training grace. It says, "...the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly."

You see, Jesus comes to train us in moral development, to teach us how to reject impiety and worldly passions and how to live a life that is self-control, upright, and godly. Yes, Jesus teaches us to reject impiety which is a lack of reverence toward God. He also teaches us to reject our worldly passions or our worst, lowest, and basest desires. But Christianity isn't just about saying "No" to evil! It's also about saying "Yes" to good. So Jesus teaches us to live a self-controlled life. He teaches us to be

upright in our treatment of others. He teaches us to be godly, or to live a Godward life, a life of loving obedience to God.

Now we at the Naval Academy should appreciate the training grace of Jesus Christ. After all, moral development is central to our own mission. According to our mission statement, we exist to develop midshipmen morally... and to imbue them with the highest ideals of duty, honor and loyalty. But long before we entered into the mission of moral development, Jesus began his mission of training grace. My friend, have you been trained by Jesus to reject the wrong and do the right? Are you being trained on a daily basis? Can you say what the old illiterate Christian once said: I'm not what I ought to be; I'm not what I want to be; I'm not what I'm gonna be; but thank God, I'm not what I was!

This past Sunday I had a conversation with one of our congregants that illustrates the power of Jesus' training grace. You see, I was greeting our 0815 congregation in Saint Andrews Chapel when one of our most faithful members happened along. As I greeted him I noticed that he was wearing an old pin on his lapel. It was shaped like a cross superimposed on an American flag. The pin was a bit salty to say the least. The shine had dimmed with the passage of time. When I saw it I asked him how long he had been wearing it. He told me that he had been wearing it for 30 years - ever since he attended a religious retreat that changed the course of his life.

You see, this man was raised in the church and was active in worship as a Midshipman. He even attended Episcopal communion three times a week during his 2nd Class year but then fell away from his faith after graduation. As an aviator, by his own admission, he fell in with a fast living, fast moving aviation community and neglected his relationship with Jesus. After he married, his wife and children attended church but he only went with them on occasion. Then one day he was invited to participate in a Cursillo retreat.

The word "Cursillo" means "short course" and a Cursillo retreat is a 3 day short course on the Christian faith with a strong emphasis on how the grace of God empowers us to live a life of piety, study, and action. This man didn't really understand the purpose of the retreat when he agreed to go. In fact, he showed up with a bottle of liquor and a tennis racket thinking the weekend was more recreational than devotional. But something unexpected happened to him as he listened to the presentations and participated in the spiritual exercises. His faith was rekindled and Jesus began to teach him a new and better way to live. Aided by grace, he turned his back on sinful things and began to live for righteous things. When he returned home, his daughter said, "I don't know where you've been, but I want to go to!"

Today, this man is one of the most devout men I know. His love for Jesus shines through in everything he does. He's one of our prayer warriors and one of our lay Eucharistic ministers who carries prayer and communion to those who can no longer attend services due to age or infirmity. He's the inspiration behind our healing prayer service every 2nd Sunday of the month. His life is a glowing witness to the effects of Jesus' training grace - "training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and...to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly." Titus 2:12

My friend, I ask you again, have you been trained by Jesus to reject the wrong and do the right? Are you being trained on a daily basis? Can you say what the old illiterate Christian once said: I'm not what I ought to be; I'm not what I want to be; I'm not what I'm gonna be; but thank God, I'm not what I was because of Jesus' saving and training grace?

Yes, Jesus came at Christmas to give us the gifts of saving and training grace. Finally, he came to give us the gift of eternal grace in glory. Two thousand years ago, Christ was born a babe in Bethlehem. At the end of the age, he'll come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And when he comes, he'll gather his people to himself. The dead in Christ shall rise and those living for Christ shall be raised to dwell with him forever in heaven. And so Titus 2:11-13 says, "...the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and...to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Are you waiting in hope for the manifestation or coming of Jesus Christ? Are you confident that you'll be among those that he takes with him to heaven? Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Many of you here tonight are home for the holidays. You've traveled a great distance to be with those you love. Someday, if you've accepted God's saving and training grace, you'll travel home for an eternal holiday in heaven! It's a holiday you won't want to miss! Reserve your tickets now! Transportation is provided by Jesus to all who ask for it. Welcome him into your heart this Christmas and enjoy his Christmas gifts: saving grace, training grace, and eternal grace in glory. Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal Father, who has declared thy love for all by the birth of the holy Child at Bethlehem; help us to welcome him with gladness and to make room for him in our common days, so that we may live at peace with you and with one another, both now and forever. Amen.

¹ Brett Blair, www.eSermons.com, Adapted from Stephen Brown, *If God Is In Charge*, Baker Book House, October 1994.