

All Good Gifts

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15210
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org

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If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13).

Some of the happiest people I know are the ones who don't expect much. I don't mean the forlorn types who say, "If I had no bad luck I'd have no luck at all." I mean people who've learned to see every good thing in life as a gift — something unexpected and undeserved, and so all the more delightful.

That's a hard perspective to come by in our society, where there's so much stuff to be had, and people with marketing degrees try to persuade us that we need more and more of it. Our whole culture is driven by the notion that desires should be cultivated, and products and people exist to satisfy our desires. No wonder there's so much unhappiness in the gap between what we expect and what we actually have.

That's why it's so refreshing to come across people who see things differently. I used to visit an old man in another church whose wife had died, and he lived alone in a nursing home. He was almost blind from macular degeneration, and he could barely get around, but when I'd ask how he was doing, he'd say with a broad smile, "I'm grateful." He was glad for the life he'd had, and for the small blessings he still enjoyed. Not much light was getting into his eyes, but a whole lot was coming out.

In that same church a younger woman had gone through a terrible time. A couple years went by, and then things changed, and something very good came into her life. I said, "Good for you, you deserve it." But she answered me, very thoughtfully, "I don't believe in deserving. Does anybody really deserve anything?" There was not a trace of cynicism in her voice, just the recognition that all good is a gift, and the bad must be borne, and God blesses us with the one and strengthens us for the other. I thought she was very wise.

One of the great things about church is that sooner or later people begin to get the idea of grace. Grace is what happens when good things come our way

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even though we don't deserve them. Grace is all about gifts. Gifts are *gratis*, free, and when we receive a gift, the natural response is *gratitude*. We say we're grateful, and you can hear in the words themselves the connection between gifts and the feelings they evoke.

Gratitude makes us glad. Listen how the book of Acts describes the early church:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:43-47).

Do you hear what's going on? There's a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God is on the move. Lives are being changed. Everyone is getting gifts that no one deserves, and the result is a church full of joy.

Then gratitude spills over into generosity. Luke says they ate together with "glad and generous hearts." Those who had more than enough would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to anyone in need. How can anyone be full of gratitude and still be stingy when their neighbors are in need?

Now gifts, by definition, are things we don't deserve. That's the difference between gifts and wages. When we collect a paycheck we tend not to be grateful, because we've worked for what we get. We've earned our pay. But gifts are different. We don't deserve them.

Some people with a mature understanding of grace come to see that even our paychecks are a gift, in a sense. A Christian man who was doing quite well told me once, "I never expected to have this job. I never thought I'd be this lucky." He knew that even the ability to do the work he did – his intelligence, and health, and energy, and resourcefulness – was all a gift from God.

Lots of people don't see that. They think they deserve not only what they earn, but everything else too. You may have heard about the farmer who has a visit from his minister. The minister says, "What wonderful things you and the Lord

have done with this farm!" And the farmer replies, "Yes, Reverend, but you should have seen this place when the Lord was managing it all by himself."

Most people think of their accomplishments as entirely their own doing, and so they think they deserve everything they have. Some people even think they can do without God. Rabbi David Wolpe tells the story about some proud scientists who decide it's time for God to retire, so they dispatch one of their number to give God the pink slip.

"God, you are no longer needed," a scientist says. "You served a function in your day, but that day is gone. We can do everything that You can do, so goodbye." A voice booms out of the sky: "Everything?" "Yes, everything," the scientist says. "Can you make a human being from dust?" "Absolutely." "OK," says God, "let me see you make a human being." The scientist reaches down and digs his hands into the earth. "Oh, no," says God. "Get your own dust."¹

There's a wonderful line from the prophet Isaiah, who says, "O Lord ... all that we have done, you have done for us" (Isaiah 26:12). Even our own doing is also God's doing, when we do what is right. People who don't understand grace think they deserve even the gifts they get. People who do understand know that even our talents and the ability to work are blessings. All good things are gifts from God.

And for that reason, people who are full of grace and gratitude don't take themselves too seriously. They know how to laugh at themselves.

Henri Nouwen was one of the greatest writers on spirituality in our day. He was also a great fan of Vincent Van Gogh. Henri thought the life and letters and paintings of his fellow Dutchman led to all kinds of spiritual insights, so he offered courses and gave dramatic presentations about the painter. He tells the story of how he was invited once to speak to a group of nuns from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. He came out on stage with his ear bandaged like Vincent Van Gogh, and gave his usual intense, two-hour performance. But he noticed that the audience was reacting strangely. Some were surprised and delighted, but others frowned or giggled nervously. At the end of the performance, followed by rather hesitant applause, the mother superior came up and thanked him. "But, Father," she said, "when we asked you to come and give our keynote

¹David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 81.

address about Vincent, we were actually referring to our founder, St. Vincent de Paul.”²

The more we know about grace, the less we have to prove ourselves and the freer we are to laugh at our own foolishness. Nouwen thought that ministers were a lot like clowns — vulnerable like everyone else, but “wounded healers” who were part of God’s reconciling work in the world.

All good gifts come from God, and every good thing we do is God working in and through us.

Sometimes we visit a person and see something we admire, and we ask, “Where did that come from?” “Oh, my Mother gave me that,” she says. The gift is precious to her, partly because it’s beautiful, but mostly because it reminds her of her mother. The more we grow in grace, the more we say of any good thing, “Oh, God gave me that.” Contemplating the gift is a way of keeping close to the giver.

Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Notice what Jesus does *not* say. He doesn’t say we will always receive exactly what we think we want. But we will receive from God’s generous hand, and what we receive above all is what we need the most: the Holy Spirit of God. Then, the more God’s Spirit moves within us, the more we will want what God wants to give, and the happier we will be.

“No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,” Paul says (1 Corinthians 2:9). The heart of God is a glad and generous heart — like the hearts of those who see that all good gifts come from God, and belong to God, and are to be shared with others, so that our joy, like God’s own joy, may be complete.

²Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 29.