

'Tis the Season to Be Giving

Now that Thanksgiving has passed, we officially enter the Christmas season. As you read this, a few early birds have already finished their Christmas shopping. Most have barely started. In this season, there is a lot of angst in the hearts of many because of financial reversal. From the largest money markets in the world to the individual checking accounts, people are hurting. It seems that the world's formula for the financial crisis is "buck up, hunker down" and follow their opinions. Some of the logic I hear is like listening to kindergartners give advice to brain surgeons. God's people who have been affected are lingering between pushing the panic button and trusting God for the outcome.

Now we come to Christmas. People who feign themselves brave are taking the attitude, well this Christmas we will focus on other things besides gifts. If the reason is a conviction from God, I certainly understand, but if it only because of personal lack to buy, then let's evaluate if we dominated by fear or faith. Attitudes mean everything especially to kids. Tell the kids the situation; they can understand.

One of the most touching stories I've ever read comes from *Act One, An Autobiography* by Moss Hart. His memory of a childhood alienated from a father will break your heart. One searching evening at Christmastime when they attempted to connect tells it all. Allow me to let you read his own words:

"We hurried down the street, our heads bent against the wind, towards the cluster of lights at 148th Street and Westchester Avenue. I tugged at my father's sleeve as we walked past the line of merchant's pushcarts. My father would pause and ask the pushcart man the price of some toy, then, without a word we would move on to the next pushcart.

"Once or twice my father would pick up a toy, look at it, and then at me... to see if it might be something I might like. But my heart was set on a chemistry set, or a printing press or a stamp album. These items were on every pushcart we passed, but the price was always the same... and too high. When I looked up I saw that we were nearing the end of the line. Only one or two more pushcarts lay ahead of us. My father looked up too, and I heard him jingle some coins in his pocket... and suddenly in a flash I knew it all. My father had gotten together only about seventy-five cents in order to buy me a Christmas present. He hadn't dared to tell me this in case there was nothing to be purchased for so small a sum.

As I looked up at him, I saw a look of pain and disappointment in his eyes that made me feel closer to him than I had ever felt before in my entire life. I wanted to throw my arms around my father and say: "It doesn't matter... I understand... just being with you is better than a chemistry set or a printing press... I love you!" But neither of us said anything. Instead, we just stood there shivering beside each other for a long, painful moment before turning away from the last two pushcarts, and heading back towards home.

"I didn't even take his hand on the way home, nor did he take mine... We just didn't have that kind of personal relationship. And I never told him that night that for just one little moment in time I understood that we were just two lonely people... struggling unsuccessfully to reach-out to one another."

I came across this story many years ago and it never fails to touch me deeply. Rather than be like lonely people shivering in our cold, dark night, let us reach out this Christmas and touch.

1. Give yourself.

My heart is moved when I hear my depression-reared father-in-law tell of receiving a solitary orange for Christmas and when Christmas came, he unwrapped it from its peeling only to discover that it had rotted. Charles Dickens could not have written anything more pitiful than that. My father-in-law lost his father as a little boy. But with all the loss he endured, having a deceased father and unsure income for the family, he was constantly aware that his mother loved him better than life. I recall hearing some of his siblings tease him that his mother still rocked him when he was tall enough that his legs would touch the floor. Perhaps he was too big to be rocked. But when the memories of the orange-less Christmas follow him to his grave, so also will the memory of a mother who gave herself, never denied her son the one commodity that was worth more than a Lionel train, a new baseball glove or fishing rod...she gave her boy the glorious gift of herself.

Billy Sunday said the last thing you can take from a boy is that which he learned at his mother's knee. *"When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also"* (II Timothy 1:5).

My saddest Christmas came in our first Christmas in Florida. My brother and I were upset because we had to give away our favorite winter toy, our sleds. The sleds would have been no use in Central Florida. Dad had just taken the position at a small Seminary and was in the process of starting a church. We didn't have much that year. I received a Bible purchased with S&H Green Stamps. Most of you reading these words do not know what Top Value or S&H Green Stamps were. They were stamps given based on your grocery and dry goods purchases. So while Mom was selectively buying household necessities, she was saving up Green Stamps for my present. I had seen the Bible in a magazine and commented how nice it was. So that was my Christmas present. The Bible and a rubber ball and that was it! To this day I value, not only the fact that my parents did what they could do, they lived the Bible in front of me. And when I played Little League ball, whenever Mom could, she came.

You may give yourself to those you love. That's better than anything at the store. Presence is better than presents!

2. Give to God.

December 28th is our annual double-tithe Sunday. Don't leave out Jesus on His birthday. God doesn't need our tithe; it is our way that we say to God, "We give you a portion of what we have to say to You, Lord... You own all there is of me." The Bible says, *"Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine"* (Proverbs 3:9,10). It is a way of saying to God that you want to love Him more this year than last year, yes and if possible, twice as much! Therefore, as a birthday present to Jesus we double-tithe at Christchurch.

Giving not only blesses our life, but also goes beyond our life. We have several dear Christian friends who went home to be with Jesus this year. I am amazed at the generosity of some of these people who left a portion for their church. So as Christmas comes this year, we are thankful those who can give and we want to remind those who cannot give beyond their normal tithes and offerings, you can still give yourself to those you love. Also, be touched that others who have passed into glory have you covered.

Merry Christmas!

- Pastor Pope -

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