

HOW TO CELEBRATE THE LORD OF GIVING Acts 20:33-35

"I [Paul] have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands have provided for my needs and for those who were with me.³⁵ In every way I've shown you that by laboring like this, it is necessary to help the weak and to keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, for He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

INTRODUCTION

People claiming to be generous are often not as good-hearted as they may seem. Some years back, six Royal Palm trees were hacked upon and then cut down on Flagler Street, one of the main highways running through the heart of Miami, FL, to the ocean. Due to the expense involved, Dade County wasn't sure how soon, if ever, these prize palms would be replaced. Quite unexpectedly, a generous donation paid for the purchase and planting of six new trees. The former trees were 15' tall and formed a beautiful foreground for a "Fly Delta" Airlines billboard. These new Royal Palms were a magnificent 35' high; so tall they now hid the "Fly Delta" billboard completely. Who donated these new palm trees? Eastern Airlines.

Today we focus upon How to Celebrate the Lord of Giving, whose generosity toward us may be the most genuine, least understood, and most misinterpreted act of giving in the history of the universe!

I. THE LORD'S GIVING TOWARD US

Not quite six weeks ago, you participated in the tradition of giving and receiving gifts in celebration of Christmas. Please spell out loud with me the first six letters of "Christmas": "C-h-r-i-s-t," which spells the name, "Christ." The *Christmas* story puts God's *graciously* giving nature upon display more brilliantly than the "star" guiding "magi" who came "to worship" the Son of God humbly incarnating Himself as a human child born in a feeding trough (**Matthew 2:1-11**). These magi knew that from His first breaths on that first Christmas night, **Jesus** existed as, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (**John 1:29-34**). An angel assured His earthly father Joseph, "the Child who has been conceived in" Mary "is of the Holy Spirit." "[Y]ou shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (**Matthew 1:20-21**, NASB). "Jesus" means "the LORD [Yahweh-God's most sacred name] is salvation."

Contempt of our Creator's standards of selfless love and goodness doomed us to everlasting separation from Heaven's God. Our only hope was for someone to take our collective punishment upon Himself; to become, in the words of **I John 2:2**, "the propitiation [merciful sacrifice] for our sins; and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world." Only a man with God's infinite worth, who is God Himself, could die in behalf of an infinite number of people. Our Heavenly Father possesses such stunningly selfless love that He approved His Son tasting the Hellish judgments we deserve to become our Savior from such doom. **Jesus** assured us in **John 3:16-17** (NIV): "'For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.'" **Jesus'** death on the Cross spectacularly demonstrates our God is the Lord of giving by how much He "gave" to save us from total ruin.

II. OUR GIVING TOWARD THE LORD

A missionary challenged a church at Christmastime with the need to share the Good News of **Jesus Christ** in foreign lands. This church took a special offering to aid the missionary's work. A man sitting next to the aisle folded his arms. Alternating scowls and frowns made it plain he did not want to be there. Perhaps his wife made him come that morning. When the usher held the plate in front of him, he just shook his head. The usher jiggled the plate invitingly. Again he shook his head. The usher leaned over and whispered, "It's for missions, you know." The man scowlingly mumbled, "I don't believe in 'em." With a quick wit, the usher then leaned down and said, "Then you take some out. It's for the heathen, anyway."

Have you ever asked yourself what's the best gift to offer God in return for the cost of His sacrificial giving toward you? I have a startling answer for you: It's to cooperate with **Jesus** as He saves you from getting your way or even wanting to get your way. The essence of sin, the cause of all that's harmful and hurtful in the world around us, is the insistence we want things our way, whether or not this is God's way and regardless if this is truly best for others. We "sin" by making up our own rules of right and wrong. Evil, death, and destruction came to our world when Adam and Eve first insisted on doing something their way, even after God told them it was not His way and would ruin them; even after they experienced perfect health, love, and joy by choosing God's way (**Genesis 1-3**). Edwin, of North Carolina, bought a new car with a voice-warning system. At first he was amused to hear a soft female voice gently remind him his seat belt wasn't fastened or give him other prompts. Edwin affectionately called the voice the "little woman." One day, his "little woman" warned him in her sweet voice, "Your fuel level is low." Edwin nodded his head and thanked her. He figured he still had enough gas to go another 50 miles, so he kept on driving. A few minutes later, her voice interrupted again with the same warning. And so it went, over and over. He knew it was the same recording, but Edwin thought her voice sounded harsher each time. Finally, he stopped his car and crawled under the dashboard. After a quick search, he found the appropriate wires and gave them a good yank. So much for the little woman! He was still smiling to himself a few miles later when his car began sputtering. Soon his engine died. He ran out of gas! Somewhere inside the dashboard, Edwin thought he could hear the little woman laughing at him.

The Son of God did not laugh when Adam and Eve began sputtering and dying from the consequences of rejecting God's wise guidance; the same consequences that every human being has since suffered. To qualify as our Savior and restore us fully to God's uplifting, loving Presence, which selfish rejection of God's loving authority cost us, **Jesus** had to live as God intended Adam and Eve to live, as God intends us to live, by never insisting upon doing things His way rather than God's way. Even when confronted with the physical torture, emotional agony, and spiritual horrors associated with His arrest, trial, & crucifixion—when "the LORD . . . put on Him the punishment for all the evil we have done" (**Isaiah 53:6**, NCV)—**Jesus** never selfishly rebelled against God's will. **Matthew 26:39** (GNT) tells us that just hours before His arrest, "[Jesus] went a little farther on, threw Himself face downward on the ground, and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from Me! Yet not what I want, but what You want.'"

Did **Jesus** as a man have the normal human desires, drives, and needs we do? Yes! **Hebrews 2:17** (GNT) tells us, "He had to become like His people in every way, in order to be their faithful and merciful High Priest in His service to God, so that the people's sins would be forgiven." **Hebrews 4:15** (GNT) adds, "Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin." In other words, despite His natural mind or heart screaming at Him in difficult moments to think of Himself first, **Jesus** kept His self will in loving submission to God's will. He never insisted on doing things His way. He once said, "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (**John 6:38**, NASB). Though fully God Himself, **Jesus**, as the Son of God, still followed the orders of God the Father.

How well do you take orders? Christian Herter was Governor of Massachusetts, 1953-57. He declined to run for reelection. Instead, he campaigned tirelessly for the person he believed should next be governor. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a campaign event at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon; Herter was famished. He held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put one piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line. "Excuse me," the Governor said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?" "Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person." "But I'm starved," the Governor said. "Sorry," she said, "Only one to a customer." Governor Herter, normally a modest man, decided to throw his weight around this time. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the Governor of this State." "Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister." Governor Herter moved along.

Our Creator-God knows that *forced* love or obedience is not *true* love or obedience, so He gave us the precious privilege of choice. **Acts 8:25b-28a** (GWT) explains, "He gives everyone life, breath, and everything they have. . . . ²⁷ He has done this so that they would look for God, somehow reach for Him, and find Him. In fact, He is never far from any one of us. ²⁸ Certainly, we live, move, and exist because of Him." Do we owe entirely to God's kind will our planet and its complex systems sustaining all life upon it? How about our friends and family members, or the remarkable design of our bodies. Our greatest temptation is to make someone, something, or ourselves the center of *our* universe, *our* god, instead of keeping God in His rightful place at the center of our lives. **Psalms 95:6** instructs us, "Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker." The Hebrew verb "to worship" literally means "to bow down or prostrate oneself." It reveals the attitude of a person subject to a reigning king. We do not truly "worship" the Lord unless we choose to surrender ourselves to His leadership and His authority. This does not mean we'll always understand God's will. A young girl once asked, "Mama, why did papa have appendicitis and have to pay the doctor a thousand dollars?" "It was God's will, dear," her Mom replied. The girl thought for a moment and then asked, "Was it because God was mad at papa or because of how pleased He was with the doctor?"

When we realize how desperately we need salvation from our selfish will, the Christmas story of why the Son of God came to earth as a child in Bethlehem will take on a new meaning. We'll be inspired to cooperate with **Jesus** to save us from selfishly wanting to get *our* way. We'll trust God's wisdom and goodness by wanting Him always to get *His* way in our lives. We'll discover by experience the truth of Christ's words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

CONCLUSION

Many here today know the Boy Scout Oath. Would you recite it with me? "On my honor, I will do my best, To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; To help other people at all times; To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight." If we substitute "God's Law" for "Scout Law," this is a code worthy of Christians. The Boy Scout slogan is, "Do a good turn daily."

Thirteen-year-old Frank Wilson sought to honor his oath to the Boy Scouts and to his Savior, **Jesus Christ**. But he struggled to be happy that Christmas season. He was grateful for a traditional Christmas Eve reunion with relatives to exchange gifts and good wishes. He appreciated receiving all the presents he'd wanted. But Frank was not happy because this was his first Christmas without his brother, Steve. Steve lost his life that year to a reckless driver. Frank missed his brother's close companionship.

After saying his good-byes at the family reunion, Frank told his parents he would visit a friend; from there he could walk home. It was cold outside. He put on his new plaid jacket; his favorite gift. He placed his other presents on his new sled. He sought the understanding counsel of his patrol leader, a boy his age of his Scout troop. But his leader lived in the Flats, the section of town where most of the poor lived. To Frank's disappointment, his friend was not at home but was off doing an odd job to help support his family.

As Frank headed home, he began to notice the modest decorations of the small houses. Through one front window, he glimpsed a shabby room. Limp stockings hung over an empty fireplace near a woman weeping. Two brothers had hung their stockings side-by-side; hoping to awake Christmas morning to find them bursting with presents. Frank recalled he'd not done his "good deed" for the day and knocked on the door. "Yes?" the sad woman asked. She saw his sled full of gifts. She assumed he was making a collection and said, "I have no food or gifts for you. I have nothing for my own children." "That's not why I am here," Frank said. "Please choose whatever presents you would like for your children from the sled." "Why, God bless you!" the amazed woman gratefully responded. She selected some candies, a game, a toy airplane, and a puzzle. When she took the Scout flashlight, Frank almost protested. Finally, the stockings were full. "Won't you tell me your name?" she asked. "Just call me the Christmas Scout," he replied.

This visit brought an unexpected joy to Frank's saddened heart. It helped him realize his sorrow wasn't the only sorrow in the world. Before he left the Flats, he'd given away the rest of his gifts. Even his favorite present, his new plaid jacket, had gone to a shivering boy. Yet, despite the inner glow with which his sacrificial giving had warmed his heart, Frank felt cold and uneasy as he approached his house. How could he explain to his parents that he'd given away his presents? When he entered his home empty handed, they were displeased. They misinterpreted his actions as displeasure over what he'd been given. They told him two things: they didn't know how they could explain what he'd done to his relatives who'd spent much time, money, and love upon him; and his parents couldn't afford more presents. With his family disappointed in him, Frank suddenly felt dreadfully alone. He did not want his gifts back. But his joy of earlier that evening had vanished. He felt his brother's loss more keenly than ever. He sobbed himself to sleep.

The next morning, he came downstairs to find his parents listening to Christmas music on the radio. Then the announcer spoke: "Merry Christmas, everyone! The nicest Christmas story we have this morning comes from the Flats. A crippled boy down there has a new sled this morning that was left at his house by an anonymous teenage boy. Another youngster has a fine plaid jacket, and several families report that their children were made happy last night by gifts from a teenage lad who simply called himself the 'Christmas Scout.' No one could identify him, but the children of the Flats claim the Christmas Scout was a personal representative of old Saint Nick." Frank felt his father's arms go around his shoulders; he saw his mother smiling at him through her tears. "Why didn't you tell us, son? We didn't understand. We are so proud of you. You've reminded us that sacrificial giving is the true meaning of Christmas." The radio then filled the room with these words from "O Little Town of Bethlehem": "How silently, how silently, The wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts The blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive Him still, The dear Christ enters in."