

“What God Wants For Christmas” (John 1:12) Christmas Day, Dec. 25, 2008

These days, a lot of folks go overboard buying presents for kids. And you know what? I am one of them. Personally, I think there are a lot worse sins than being too generous. But to be honest, I don't just do it because I am generous. No, partly it's because kids' toys today are just so cool! Walking through most any toy department, one thing after another catches my eye, and I can't help thinking, "Man, would my niece like that!" "Man, would my godson like that!" And so it goes. Why, these days even kids' religious items are cool, and for a pastor they're especially tempting!

For instance, there is one called, *“What God Wants For Christmas.”* In this neat little kit, there is a book, a CD, a manger scene, and then there are seven little boxes; the kids open one each day before Christmas. But best of all is the box they open on Christmas. Inside, they find a mirror. Now at first, the child may wonder, *What's up with this?* But then you remind them that the kit is called “What God wants for Christmas.” The child looks in the mirror again, then you see them grin as the message finally dawns on them: *God wants me.*

Children aren't the only ones who need this message. Really, it's important for people of every age to know: God wants you and me. That's the truth at the heart of Christmas. That's the truth at the heart of the Gospel. That's the truth that explains all Jesus said and did from birth to death to resurrection. It all had just one goal. Or rather, it all has just one goal. God wants you and me – wants you and me. God wants us now and forever.

Now, to our accustomed ears, this message may not sound all that extraordinary, but believe me, it is! In fact, when you think how religion usually pictures God and His attitude toward us, it's really quite unique. So much religion – even some claiming to be Christian religion -- is about us reaching up to God. Us reaching up to God, us getting things from God, and ultimately us pleasing God enough earn our way to heaven. It's really pretty much one direction, from here to there; from us to God. Salvation especially is supposedly up to us. Almost always that's how religion pictures God and His attitude towards human beings.

And when you think about it, that's a pretty discouraging picture. Us reaching up to God? Okay, that's not so bad. Just a little pitiful, considering how badly we do it. Or us figuring out ways to get things from God. What can I say? More than just a little pitiful. But the idea of us pleasing God enough with our good works to earn our way to heaven – that is discouraging. In fact, it's downright impossible.

Speaking for myself, if I were to look in that little Christmas mirror I just mentioned, the person I'd see looking back at me would never be able to earn his own salvation. For starters, I would need a much better track record. But even if I never did anything wrong – and what are the chances of that? – whatever I did right would still just be what God expects of me anyway, not some “extra credit”

that could earn me a place in heaven. Plus, there's the whole attitude issue. Selfishness, pettiness, sometimes even...stubbornness. Attitude also matters! No, the person I'd see in that Christmas mirror is not someone who could ever claim to please God enough to earn his way to heaven. I suspect the rest of us would have to admit the same. There is a reason why Scripture says, "**no one is righteous, not a single one;**" also that in God's eyes, "**all our righteousness is like filthy rags.**" So when you think about the way much of religion portrays our situation with God, it's a pretty discouraging picture.

...And quite a contrast to the good news we are celebrating this morning – the good news at the heart of Christmas that God wants you and me! Fortunately, when God looks at the person we see in the Christmas mirror, He doesn't just see what we see. He doesn't just see a person who falls short. No, God sees a precious child He wants to live with Him forever. In fact, God sees such a precious child, that no matter what the cost, no matter what the effort, He is willing to do whatever it takes for us to live with Him forever.

Before the foundation of the world, God had already begun preparing a place for us in heaven. Before our first parents fell into sin, He'd already worked out a plan for our salvation. True, that fall into sin was a major obstacle. Sin separated us from God and was not something God could just overlook. But even though sin mattered, we mattered more. We mattered infinitely more. So, knowing we could not work our way up to Him, God came to us instead. And knowing that we could not atone for sin ourselves, God came to us as a human being to do what had to be done Himself. In Jesus, God took on the full responsibility for saving the human race. In Jesus, God took on the full weight of human guilt and shame, and on the cross Jesus paid the full penalty for every sin that ever was or would be. In Jesus, God took care of everything – everything necessary for us to be forgiven, restored, and guaranteed a place in heaven. A place not earned by us, but given by Him – given as a gift, received through faith. As Jesus promised, "**whoever believes in Me, though they die, yet shall they live...**" In Jesus God took care of everything. That's why Jesus came. That's why Jesus was born. Because God so wanted you and me!

Yes, that is the good news we are celebrating this morning. What God wants for Christmas is you and me; for you and me to be His children; for you and me to live with Him forever. But you know, included in this good news, there is also an invitation – to give God what He wants; to give ourselves to God more fully, more completely this Christmas morning. Actually, the two go hand in hand. John makes this clear in our text, especially if we put it in the present tense: "**To all who receive Him, who believe in his name, He gives power to become children of God.**"

Think about it this way. Gift-giving can be a tricky business. I'll bet we can all think of times when we worked so hard on a gift for someone, or sacrificed so much to buy it, only to have that person hardly give it a look. We all know how

awful that feels! And considering how much *God* has done to give us human beings the gift of salvation, only to have so many hardly give His gift a look (if even that much!) – well, we can't imagine how much that must break His heart! But by the same token, we all know how good it feels when someone loves the gift we've given them. And when they also appreciate how hard we worked on it, how much we sacrificed to be able to give it – when they appreciate us – that feels even better, doesn't it? In fact, in a strange way, that very gratitude feels like a gift right back. It's not so much what they do in return, but just their willingness to receive...and appreciate...and make the most what we have given them. Yes, that's a gift right back. Really, it's a gift of themselves; a gift *of* the heart, *from* the heart.

And that's the invitation to us this Christmas morning – to receive and appreciate and make the most of God's gift of our Savior, Jesus. For in the same way, that's giving God a gift right back – giving God ourselves, especially the part of ourselves that matters most to Him: a gift *of* the heart, *from* the heart. I think it was Kierkegaard who said: *You can't have the Lord without the Lord having you.* That's true, isn't it? And it's equally true put the other way around: *If you receive the Lord, you give yourself to Him; the more fully you receive the Lord, the more fully you give yourself to Him.* And that's the invitation. The more fully we trust in Jesus, depend on Jesus, turn to Jesus day by day, the more we'll be giving God the gift He wants the most: *you and me.*

So, in spirit at least, let's look into that Christmas mirror I mentioned at the outset, and let's be sure to see all there is to see in it. Speaking for myself, I see a person who could never earn his way to heaven – and thanks to Jesus, doesn't need to. I see a person whom God loves with a love so great He did everything necessary to save him. In fact, I see a person who is exactly what God wants for Christmas. Is that what you see, too? Then let us make sure we see one more thing. Let us see ourselves as the gift we give God more fully, more completely than ever, by receiving Christ into our lives more fully, more completely than ever. For **“to all who receive Him, who believe in his name, He gives power to become children of God.”** Amen.