

## “The Gift We Seek” (Luke 2:11)

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2007

Several years ago, a TV reporter was working on a special called *The Spirit of Christmas*, so he phoned the British ambassador and said, “Sir, you have been very kind to us through the year and we would like to include you in our Christmas special. So tell me, what would you like for Christmas?” The ambassador replied, “I am very touched by your offer, but I cannot accept any gift.” “Oh please,” said the reporter, “you really have been helpful to us. Won’t you please tell me what you would especially like for Christmas?” Again the ambassador refused. But the reporter wouldn’t give up, so he finally replied, “All right, if you insist, this Christmas I would like a jar of mint jelly.”

The ambassador didn’t give this conversation another thought -- until Christmas Eve, when he turned on the news and heard the same reporter introducing his special on *The Spirit of Christmas*. “We recently interviewed three ambassadors and asked them what they would like for Christmas. These diplomats each gave revealing answers when they pondered what they would most like during this season of goodwill. The German ambassador said: ‘I would like to see a peaceful and prosperous decade ahead for the reunited German people and for all the people on earth...’ The Swiss ambassador said: ‘My wish is that our world leaders would pursue a common goal of peaceful coexistence.’ And then we asked the British ambassador, who said, ‘I would like a jar of mint jelly.’”

Talk about embarrassing! Imagine having everyone think the one gift you wanted was something so trivial! The only thing worse would be really setting your heart on something trivial – whether or not anyone found out! Though, come to think of it, that’s not an uncommon problem this time of year, is it?

But don’t worry. That’s not what I’m going to preach about tonight. No need! I’m sure we all know the dangers of materialism. I’m sure we all know better than to make Christmas just about “getting things.” In fact, I doubt any of us would be here tonight if that were really a problem we needed to confront.

No, what I would like to talk about is the gift we *do* prize above all others – the gift of a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And rather than issue a challenge to do more of this or that – or a challenge to do less of this or that – what I’d like to do instead is just bask in the good news for a moment; just bask in the love and grace embodied in that babe lying in the manger.

Do we have time for that? Sure we do. Maybe we haven’t had time up till now. Maybe we’ve been so busy getting ready for Christmas that just basking in its meaning has seemed a luxury we couldn’t afford. But now – well, whatever didn’t get done, didn’t get done! And somehow it’s still Christmas! In fact, isn’t it ironic that we put so much effort into making Christmas perfect when in fact the whole point of Christmas is that God loves us in spite of us not being perfect? He loves us so much He sent His Son to be our Savior! You know, the first

Christmas left a lot to be desired, too, yet it was still Christmas. Why should this Christmas be any different? Let's allow ourselves at least this moment to relax a bit, take a deep breath, and just bask in the assurance that no matter what God loves us, accepts us, forgives us – and has proven it by giving us His Son, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Think back to that precious moment when God first gave us this Gift! As we picture the nativity scene, so much was far from perfect, wasn't it? Yet it doesn't bother us that the Christ Child had to sleep in a manger. It doesn't bother us that all He had to wear were swaddling cloths. It doesn't bother us that the only ones to celebrate His birth were a bunch of shepherds – and that nothing was decorated; no Christmas tree was in sight, much less presents underneath. None of this matters in the least! And why? Because the Child Himself overshadows everything else! The Christ Child and what His birth means! He is the fulfillment of God's promise to save. He is the bringer of God's amazing grace. He is the assurance that come what may, **“neither death nor life...nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.”** In that not-so-perfect setting, the Gift just shone all the more brightly. And that's worth remembering now. Whatever may be lacking, whatever may seem undone, the important thing is God's gift of a Savior and what His birth means.

In fact, that's worth remembering period. You know, a lot of times people talk about keeping the spirit of Christmas alive all year long. And what they mean, of course, is keeping alive the spirit of giving, the spirit of kindness, the spirit of good-will. That's a nice idea, but if we really want to keep the spirit of Christmas alive all year long, an even better way would be to keep in mind what the birth of a Savior means – **“by grace you have been saved,” not your works** – and remember it especially when we're not at our best. After all, when God planned what to give us the first Christmas, He didn't think to Himself: *Hmmm. Let me give them some unfair expectations that they can feel guilty about not fulfilling. And let me give them a few more pressures just to keep them on their toes. And while I'm at it, why not give them more stress and anxiety, too, so they'll never ever be able to relax and enjoy the good they do for others?* No, that wasn't God's thinking at all – though from what Christmas has become, you might not guess that! When God planned what to give us the first Christmas, He focused on what we truly need: *I'll give them forgiveness – so they won't have to be weighed down by guilt anymore. I'll give them strength and support – to help them deal with the pressures they've already got. I'll give them acceptance – my acceptance as their heavenly Father. And most of all, I'll give them eternal life – so they'll always know, whatever twists or turns their road through life may take, that their destination is sure: an eternity of glory with Me.* Yes, that was God's thinking when He planned what to give us the first Christmas. He planned to give us His love – unconditional love, unconquerable love, unending love. And that's what He *did* give us. He wrapped it up in a baby boy named Jesus. He delivered it in the little town of Bethlehem. And the gift is still ours here and now – especially when we're not at our best; even at Christmas!

My friends, could there be a greater gift? This is the Christmas gift we need more than any other: the assurance of God's unconditional, unconquerable, unending love in Christ! It may not take away all the unfair expectations we have to deal with in life, but it sure can put them in perspective! It may not take away the pressure and stress and anxiety, but it sure can provide a counter-balance! Just to be able to relax as we are right now, to take a deep breath, and know in our heart of hearts: *Whatever I'm up against, God loves me, and nothing in all creation can separate me from His love in Christ Jesus my Lord!* Yes, that's some gift! And the gift is ours. Ours at Christmas! Ours all year long! Even when our situation or our track record is not so perfect. We just need to remember it and trust it and take it to heart: God's love for us in Christ.

Some years ago, this wonderful truth came home in a striking way at a kindergarten holiday program. It wasn't intentional. Oh no! In these politically-correct times, the planners had made very sure that there would be no religious songs, no religious references whatsoever. They could talk about Santa and snowmen, but no babe in a manger; definitely no **"God so loved the world."** The closest they let it get was a scene called *"Christmas Love."* And ironically, it was in the not-so-perfect execution of this scene that the true meaning of Christmas snuck through.

The plan was to have the class sing "C is for Christmas" and have a child hold up the letter C; then, "H is for Happy," and have a child hold up the letter H; and so on, until they spelled out the phrase "Christmas Love." Well, everything went according to plan until the girl with the letter "M" held it upside down. "M" thus became a "W". As you might guess, the audience laughed their heads off. But the girl didn't know they were laughing at her, so just she stood there proudly holding up her "W" – which made them laughter all the more. You can imagine how the teacher felt. After all her hard work to get everything just right, the program was ruined! But then the last child raised the last letter, and suddenly the laughter stopped. A hush came over the audience. And why? Because in that moment, the message that had been so carefully avoided up till then wonderfully appeared. The true meaning of Christmas was held up by those little kindergarteners for all to see: "CHRIST WAS LOVE."

And yes, Christ was love. And He is love. And He always will be. That is the assurance we take home with us tonight. Even if our preparations for Christmas haven't been so perfect. Even if our lives haven't been so perfect, either. That's just all the more reason to remember and trust and take to heart the gift proclaimed by the angels long ago: **"To you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."** He is the embodiment of God's love for us. He is the proof of God's love for us. And in our heart of hearts, He, above all, is the gift we seek. Amen.