

Don't waste Jesus' gifts
Hebrews 10:19-25

Pastor Tom
May 25, 2014

How many of you received or gave out gift cards last Christmas? They can be a great way to somewhat personalize a gift. They also give the receiver freedom to purchase something that they really want or need. But did you know that approximately 1 billion dollars a year goes unspent on gift cards. Few people waste their coffee gift cards? But when you have 3.99 left on a gift card to a department store, many don't use it. It's estimated that since they started in 2005, 41 billion dollars of gift card balances remain unspent. That's a waste.

But consider the waste a rich son experienced while trying to show love to his mother. He was determined to give her a birthday present that would outshine all others. He read of a bird that had a vocabulary of 4000 words, could speak in numerous languages and sing 3 operatic arias. He immediately bought the bird for \$50,000 and had it delivered to his mother. The next day he phoned to see if she had received the bird. "What did you think of the bird?" he asked. She replied, "It was delicious."

Now it's one thing to waste a few unspent dollars on a gift card or to waste \$50,000 on a gift that you thought would last a long time for your mother. But it's another to waste infinitely expensive gifts from God. Yet people do it all the time. It can happen to us. One way this happens is through something that has gained great prominence in our culture over the last say 20 years.

This something is called "Individualism." Individualism focuses on the individual. It can be a stance, philosophy or outlook that emphasizes the worth of the individual. Individualists argue that the interests of the individual should take priority over the state or social group. Individualism starts with the idea that the human individual is of primary importance.

There is a good side to individualism. In the past, societies and civilizations placed little value on the life of most individuals. They treated people like cattle or simply part of a whole. So in the First World War, if you lost 1 million soldiers in a battle, that was war. In the Second World War, the Soviet Union lost about 20 million soldiers. But their philosophy elevated the survival of the country and party above the value of individual lives. An individualism that recognizes each human being is a unique creation of God is a good development.

But individualism can go too far. The individual's preferences or desires can govern everything. A person or a culture can become so me-focused that it becomes intensely self-centered. This can flow into our Christian walk. Individualistic thinking in the Christian realm might express itself like this. "I don't really like going to a church. So I'm going to practice my Christianity by doing my own personal thing spiritually just between God and I. And that will be good enough." Or "I don't really like parts of that church. The music is okay but I don't like the preacher. But when I look at this other church, the preaching is good. But I don't like the music or the people. So instead of actually physically gathering with other Christians, I'm going to watch or listen to my favorite preacher from this church for the message. And I'm going to watch or listen to the music from another church for worship." So did you hear that problem with that? It's all about me. There's nothing of God in that discussion. There's nothing of face to face interaction with other Christians. Individualism can affect our spiritual lives by leading us to skip gathering with others because we don't have time or it's inconvenient.

If we let individualism dominate our outlook, we could be wasting the most precious gifts we've ever been offered. We're going to discover what those gifts are, how we guard against wasting them and why it's so important to pay attention to this.

Hebrews 10:19-25

[19] Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, [20] by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, [21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God, [22] let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. [23] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. [24] And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The writer begins with two great gifts from Christ described in the first half of this passage. But to understand why these are great gifts, we have to go back to the life of a Jewish worshipper at the temple of Jerusalem. If you wanted to worship God, you had to present an animal sacrifice. The recent history of your walk with God determined the type of sacrifice needed. If you were thankful to God's blessing, you presented a thanksgiving offering. If you had sinned, you presented a sin offering. If you simply wanted to enjoy God's presence you presented a fellowship offering. But you couldn't just go into the temple and present your offering.

Various courts surrounded the temple. First there was the court of the Gentiles or non-Jews. Some Gentiles came to fear Israel's God. So they could come and worship Him but they could only go as far as the court of the Gentiles. If they brought a sacrifice, it would have to be taken into the sacrificial area by a priest. Next was the court of women. They were allowed to go closer than the Gentiles. But they had to stop at the court of men. Israelite men could go beyond the women's court into the court directly outside the temple. There they would give their animal to the priest who would sacrifice it on the altar. But ordinary Israelite men could still not go inside the temple. Only priests could do that. They were allowed to enter the first room – the Holy Place. Inside this first room you would find 7 candles on a stand, a table of bread and an altar of incense. Each day a priest would enter the Holy Place to offer incense and commune with God. But even the priests were not allowed to go into the most holy place. A large curtain separated the first room from the holy of holies. The only person who could go inside the holy place was the high priest. He could only do that once a year during the High Jewish holiday called the Day of Atonement. So the vast majority of Israelites never got to get that close to God. He certainly met them through their worship wherever they stood on the temple mount. But they could not get into the holiest place.

Now with that picture in mind, we can unpack the two great gifts from Jesus found in this passage.

What are the great gifts from Christ?

#1 – Entrance to the Holiest Places – Intimate Fellowship With God. Listen to 19 and 20 again. “we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh.” So the author points to how Jesus opened up the holiest places for us. By His blood sacrifice he went into a spiritual temple like the earthly one. By His blood, he had the right to go into the holy place, through the curtain and into the holy of holies to fellowship with God. Jesus – the only human being who could enter the Holiest Places by his own merit and blood. So anyone who trusts in Jesus and His sacrifice is given the gift of also entering into the spiritual holy of holies.

We don't have to go to Jerusalem to search for ancient temple ruins to find God. We have access to the spiritual holy places on account of Jesus' blood sacrifice. The writer tells us in verse 20 that this is a new and living way compared to the old way where only one human once a year could go into the holy of holies. Jesus opened the way through the curtain. In fact, his death tore open the curtain. You might know about the account in Matthew's gospel that tells us

when Christ died, the temple in the curtain was supernaturally torn in half from top to bottom. Matthew 27:51 – “And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” This showed that the entranceway to God was now open through Jesus. Anyone who trusts in Christ and His sacrifice is given the same privilege. We don’t have to go through all those rituals. We don’t have to stand at a distance. We have an access to God that was unavailable before Jesus’ great work on the cross. This is a privilege that millions of God’s people never had before Christ. Now we can enjoy this deep intimacy with God.

But the writer mentions a second great gift. Verse 21 – Since we have a great priest over the house of God. **Gift #2 – Jesus is the Great High Priest over us.** We don’t have to depend on a flawed and frail human being as our high priest. Jesus is our great high priest. We don’t have to find a priest to take our sacrifice to God. Jesus was the sacrifice. We don’t have to wait until a priest is available to talk to God. Jesus is always available. We don’t have to fear any priestly misconduct or poor leadership. We have the perfect High Priest over us.

Jesus gave us these two great gifts, confidence to enter the Holy Places by His blood, Himself as our great High Priest. The author of Hebrews constantly points us to Christ and His work. Why? George Guthrie’s commentary on Hebrews puts it like this - “Your perseverance in the faith (and in ministry) is going to be in direct proportion to the clarity with which you see who Jesus is and what He has accomplished on our behalf.” God has spoken into the world, preeminently in the person of His Son. We are to hear what God has said and respond to it accordingly.” So we now have these two great gifts in mind.

How can we guard against neglecting the great gifts from Christ?

1) Draw near to God with a sincere heart. (22) “Verse 22 – Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” Basically, the writer encourages Christians to take advantage of their close access to God. We can draw near or get close to God unlike many Old Testament worshippers. We do so on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice for us. We come humbly with a sincere heart. Notice he draws a picture of one cleansed. Hearts have been sprinkled clean. Bodies have been washed. Maybe he’s thinking of the ceremonial washing the worshipper did before entering the temple courts. You washed your hands and sprinkled water on your body to proclaim your desire to come before God clean. Perhaps during that time, they prayed and confessed their sins before God. Then they came with clean hands and hearts. Now we can draw near

to God in a deep intimacy because of Jesus' blood sacrifice. Then he mentions another way we can take hold of the great gifts Christ gave us.

2) Hold fast to the confession of hope without wavering. (23) The confession of hope is our faith in Christ looking forward to the hope of His return and the hope of His help in everyday life. There will be many things that assault our faith throughout life, false teaching; persecution; tragedy; hard times; health problems; loss; disappointment. Yet the writer says you must hold fast or hold on steadfastly to the confession of hope. To hold fast means to grab tightly to Jesus – fix our eyes on Him. Our hope is not in ourselves or the strength of our faith but the strength of the one we put our faith in. When our eyes and faith are firmly fixed on Christ, we stand without wavering. “Without wavering” or “steadfastly” refers to an upright object that does not lean or tilt sideways.

Some of you might remember country mail boxes from a generation ago. They stood on top of posts at the edge of a person's property. The mail man would come along and stick the mail into their box. But sometimes a gang would think it fun to drive along those country roads and play mailbox baseball. One person would take a baseball bat and stand in the passenger's seat of an open car or in the back of a truck. Then as they car drove by, they would try to knock the mail box off it's post or at least get the pole to lean. Now I imagine many people got frustrated with constantly repairing their mail box. So I can imagine farmers coming up with all sorts of creative ways to reinforce their mail box post. I heard a story of a farmer who welded his mailbox onto a reinforced metal post that went 10 feet underground. He surrounded it with all kinds of reinforcement. He watched with great pleasure the next time one of these cars came along with a person ready to swing his baseball bat. The person would swing his bat anticipating great success. Instead the bat would just bounce off box back into the car. The mail box post had taken the blow without wavering. It held steadfastly.

That's what happens to us when we fix our yes on Christ as our hope. It's like He welds us to a solid foundation. When the invitation comes along to turn away from Christ or to water down who He is, we remain steadfast. The more we put our trust in Him, the less likely we are to waver and then waste the great gifts Jesus has for us. But there is one final way we can guard against neglecting the great gifts from Christ.

3) We need to Gather Together (24-25) As I reread verses 24-25, listen for togetherness or thinking about one another – “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the

habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” There are two one another’s and one together in those verses. This goes against pure individualism. It’s not all about us; it’s about one another and connecting to gain strength. The giant redwood trees of the western US have a relatively shallow root system. Their enormous weight is supported in part by the interlocking of one tree’s roots with those of the other trees around it. As Christians, we need “interlocking roots” with other believers in the church to withstand the enormous weight of life. Set aside individualism. Pursue community in Christ.

So we must consider one another and ponder how we can stir up or spur on each other to love and good works. The need to stir up or spur on seems to imply that love and good works don’t just happen. It needs to be worked at and even provoked. Coming together somehow stirs up this love in a world so bent on self-centeredness and gratification.

The writer also declares we must not give up meeting together. Some believers may have neglected meeting together in the 1st century out of fear of recognition by outsiders during a time of persecution. But there is a second century church document that notes preoccupation with business affairs accounted for the neglect of meetings of a house church. Notice that some had made it a habit of not meeting together. But this put the worshipper in danger of neglecting Christ’s great gifts. One writer puts it like this – *The neglect of worship and fellowship was symptomatic of a catastrophic failure to appreciate the significance of Christ’s priestly ministry and the access to God it provided.*

When Christians gathered together they worshiped God, heard the word, prayed and look after one another’s needs. Today, we gather together for worship. But we also need to gather together with other Christians to share the Christian life with.

Yet we too might fall into the habit of giving up meeting together. We may think we’re too busy or too tired. We might have trust issues. We might not like all of it. We might not be comfortable with everything said about God, life or the call of God on our lives. But that’s the point. We need exposure to God’s Word. It is important to do that personally and read our Bibles. We are not whole or complete in ourselves. We need others to speak into our lives. We desperately need God to speak into our lives. If it were up to us, we might only read the parts of the Bible that we like. Or we might only interpret the Bible in a way that we’re comfortable with. But when we gather together and hear someone unpack God’s word or hear other Christians wrestle with the word, we are stretched, challenged and encouraged in our faith.

So we have this great need to set aside individualism and embrace the community of gathering together in worship and gathering together with other Christians especially around the Word and prayer.

We need to grow in this area as a church body. We need to make ourselves available to one another. We need to open ourselves up further to one another. This needs to happen in our already established small groups. Many of our small groups have reached the maximum size workable for a smaller setting.

We may be very comfortable and happy in our current small group. But friends, there are many people who would love to be in a small group and can't find one. They long for community beyond the Sunday morning gathering. They haven't been able to find room. We need to make room either by dividing up some of our small groups or by opening up some small groups or by starting new ones. We need to make room in small groups for families with children who can't afford the cost of babysitting and need to bring their children along. We need to consider how we can stir up one another to love and good deeds in this area of meeting together. Several of you indicated a desire to reconnect with a small group after the March 2 meeting. Others of you might like to be part of one but don't know how to join. We want to see more smaller gatherings of God's people happen. If you are interested in being part of a smaller group for this fall, will you ensure we get your name at the church office or you can let me or one of the pastors know on the way out?

Sometimes gathering together involves one on one mentoring formal or informal. Sometimes it happens in a hospital visit or assisted living center visit. Sometimes it happens in the middle of a grocery store or at a coffee shop. But it's vital to the Christian life and to guarding against wasting Jesus' great gifts to us.

But is it really that big of a deal whether or not we gather together?

Hebrews 10:26-31 (ESV)

[26] For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, [27] but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. [28] Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. [29] How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? [30] For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." [31] It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

We may hear about the good gifts of the Lord while we participate in a church community like ours, but if we don't grasp their infinite value and worth, we might turn away from Christ. We might not receive Him. If we turn away

from Him, we cannot get into the most holy place any other way. If we walk away from Jesus, we walk toward judgment and fire. If we've walked away from gathering together with other Christians, we have no one to call us on the direction we're headed. So it's vital to gather together for our spiritual life and health.

Jesus has demonstrated His deep love to us by His blood sacrifice and opening up the Holy Place. Now He is your great high priest – who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses; and has experienced temptation yet never sinned. If you are not a Christian, you cannot enter the holy places. The only way to get in is through Jesus and His blood sacrifice on your behalf. So instead of trying to earn your way to favor before God or trusting in yourself, you must put your belief and trust upon Jesus. Trust Him to save you, cleanse you and give you right standing before God. Then all the benefits and blessings of salvation pour into our lives. This includes entering into the holy place to commune with God Himself. And live under the rule of the High Priest, Jesus Christ.

And if you're already a Christian, guard against treating Jesus' gifts like a gift card you've forgotten about. Draw near to Him with a sincere heart. Hold fast to Him and the hope He brings. Set aside individualism that blinds you to your need for others. Pursue community in Christ.