

Sermon File # 686

Scripture Text: John 1:10-13

Sermon Title: *The Greatest Gift of All*

Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

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The Greatest Gift of All

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to John's Gospel, Chapter One, verses 10-13, as we continue our Advent series from John's introduction (prologue) to his Gospel. We've noted in the first five verses, "the introduction to the introduction," that Christ is the eternal Word, the one who brings life and light to the world. Last Sunday we were challenged by the example of John the Baptist as an authentic witness to Christ, announcing his advent into the world. The word "advent" comes from the Latin "adventus," meaning "arrival" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*).

Today and next Sunday we will look at Scripture passages that focus on the arrival of the Son of God into the world. Today we will consider what John the Evangelist wrote about the arrival of God's Son in his incarnation, taking upon himself the likeness of our flesh, in order to give himself to us as the greatest gift of all.

We will focus on **John 1:10-13**, but I will begin reading in verse 1 in order to give us a contextual setting.

On international news I was dismayed to watch the display of shameless greed that took place in several shopping venues in my home country, the USA. Black Friday is the designation given to the biggest shopping day of the year, the day after Thanksgiving, a holiday when many merchants and large department stores offer sales on popular Christmas gift items. The designation “black” has usually indicated the boost in sales that lift merchants and businesses from the red into the black profit margin. Half the US population, about 152 million shoppers, descended on shopping centers and discount stores. But this year “black” more accurately described the dark aspect of the exposure this day gave to greed and violence.

Some Black Friday shoppers, fearful that their desired items might be sold out and wanting to get a head start on other shoppers, brought sleeping bags and actually spent the night outside the store entrance in order to be the first through the doors when the store opened on either the next morning or at midnight. In one store, chocked full of eager shoppers making a rush on certain items, a lady dispensed pepper spray, which is normally used to deter criminal assailants, to disable her shopping competition while she grabbed the items she wanted to purchase. There were at least two robberies and one man was taken to the hospital in critical condition after being shot by a rival shopper (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-15879139>).

Although, in the light of these shameful excesses, it’s possible to become cynical about the whole idea of Christmas gift-giving, when done in the right spirit and within reason, giving gifts at Christmas is a lovely tradition. I suppose it’s based on the original idea, long since lost by the secularization of the season, that just as God gave us the gift of his Son, so we give to one another in the spirit of love and gratitude. Whatever the motive, buying, giving and receiving gifts are a major part of the Christmas tradition. As a grandfather, I have to confess my tendency toward excess when Christmas shopping for our grandchildren.

Possibly the tradition of gift giving at Christmas is connected with the biblical story of the Wise Men from the East who presented gifts to the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:11). But our giving to each other seems to have little to do with our giving to Jesus. This is reason for us to give serious attention to the opportunity to give to the cause of Christ through our special Christmas offering, our heating-sound system fundraiser, as well as our church budget, which supports our ministries and gives support to numerous missionaries around the world.

Whatever offerings we present to Jesus pale in comparison to the gift of God that we celebrate at Christmas. Our text for today speaks to the very heart of the meaning of the Christmas celebration, the great gift of the Incarnation. God gave his Son, the eternal Word, to live and die that he might redeem the fallen human race, restoring a people to himself. Without doubt, the best known verse in John’s Gospel, and probably the entire Bible, is John 3:16. This verse tells us about God’s love that prompted his giving his “one of a kind” Son, so that we who believe might not die but receive eternal life. Advent means that Jesus came to give himself to us.

In our passage for this morning, John tells us that the greatest gift of all...

Demands immediate response

Our text declares that the greatest gift, the incarnation, the coming of the true light into the world, necessitated one of three responses. You can't be entirely neutral about a gift that's intended for you. You must receive it or reject it. But you also can simply ignore it and pretend it doesn't exist as far as you're concerned. A gift, even the greatest gift, can meet with...

The problem with recognition

Our text tells us an incredible truth: the eternal Word, God the Son, who with the Father and the Spirit created the very atoms, the galaxies, the earth and the elements and intricacies of our bodies came into this his creation and was unrecognized. Note verse 10:

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” Literally, the world “did not know him” is a more accurate translation of the Greek “*ouk egno*” (Borchert, 113). The unbelieving religious world was not willing to know him through faith. They refused his witness about himself. Still today there are religious people who recognize spiritual truth and concepts. They have head knowledge of religious truth and language, but no heart knowledge. There is no personal relationship with Jesus Christ and thus no change of heart. In fact, there is a greater hardness of heart against spiritual truth and God's people.

John uses the word “kosmos” to speak of the fallen world of spiritual darkness (Tasker, 46). It was indeed a dark time when Jesus came to earth. The nation of Israel, whom God chose and called to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6, etc.), had failed miserably. Only a few of God's faithful remnant survived centuries of apostasy and were expecting the arrival of God's promised Messiah, who would restore that lost light. In fact, even the leaders and teachers of the religion of God's chosen people had become so dark they failed to recognize Jesus as the Savior. This was a darkness not of intellectual but of willful ignorance. They didn't like what they saw in Jesus because he was able to see into their hearts and revealed their sinful corruption and religious hypocrisy.

The light shone in and from Jesus. In fact Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). But as John writes a bit further along in his gospel, “This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

The light of Christ has shone into the world. As Paul wrote, God has made his invisible qualities clearly visible through his creation, yet through ignoring the truth about God they concocted their own foolish theories in a futile attempt to try to hide the truth about God. Paul said that the end result is these who refused to recognize God became fools with darkened understanding (Romans 1:20-23). These “sophisticated” fools will stop at nothing in their attempts to ignore the truth of God. Consider the desperately hateful attacks upon Christian faith by militant atheist Richard Dawkins (McGrath, 8ff). And, since the Incarnation 2000 years ago there continues to be...

The response of rejection

In verse 11 we read, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

The story of Jesus is a story of his being rejected by his own world. We read in Luke's Christmas story how that when it came time for the baby Jesus to be delivered, Mary and Joseph could find no room for him. His place for birth was denied to Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:7).

In his public ministry, as he was calling disciples to follow him, Jesus noted that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Even though Jesus taught as no one ever taught, and performed miracles that made people whole and even raised the dead, he was basically rejected except by a few followers.

When given the opportunity for Jesus to be released from his sentence to be crucified, the crowd once again rejected him, and asked that a criminal be released instead (Luke 23:18-19).

And, even in his death, his body was placed in a borrowed tomb (Matthew 27:60). He was denied his own place of burial. These four "chapters of rejection," when seen against "the light of the infinite glory with which John's gospel opens," shows us "how far humanity has sunk" (Morgan, 13)

John is referring to the fact that Jesus came to that which was his own, meaning in particular the nation of Israel, which had the Scriptures that witness about him. But these who should have recognized him as the Messiah missed the truth altogether. They lacked grace for faith, and became his worst enemies. When John wrote the Revelation he had received, he referred to these unbelieving religious enemies who had instigated Jesus' crucifixion and were now persecuting the church as "the synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9; 3:9).

The rejecting of Jesus is a conscious decision that progressively hardens one's heart against the grace of God. What happened to the Jewish nation and its religious leaders happens to individuals who reject the gracious gift of the Incarnation. This is the rejection of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, which happens within the realm of religion and the church of today. Some of Jesus' worst enemies are church members who have head knowledge of truth but not a heart relationship with Jesus Christ.

In a former church my then-secretary was offended by something I did or said, and resigned precipitously and angrily. A year or so previously I had given her a decoratively carved gift box, which she returned to me the day she quit her job. She was saying by returning the gift, "I want nothing more to do with you. I don't want to receive your gift. I don't want you to think I need anything you can give me." (BTW, I'm not really a bad boss. *Really!*)

This was the mindset of those who rejected God's gift of Jesus. And, it's the mindset of people today who continue to reject Jesus as Savior and Lord. They are saying, "I don't need him. I don't want to have anything to do with him." The rejecting of Jesus

is the conscious act of the will that says “I don’t want anything to do with God in my life.”

Although Jesus was rejected and is still being rejected, that does not mean he is a beggar. He must be received on his terms, and not on ours. For that reason I have never been fond of the gospel song that speaks of Jesus’ being “there all the time, waiting patiently in line.” The picture that the eternal Word of God stands in line, a queue, behind our idols, with his “hat in his hand,” is about as unscriptural as I can imagine. Just as in his incarnation, Jesus comes today as the eternal Word and Son of God. We are the ones faced with an immediate response of what to do with his coming into our world.

This grand prologue by John describes the astounding fact that the eternal Son of God, the co-creator of this incomprehensible universe, made an appearance, made himself recognizable by all willing to see him, and yet many of his creatures chose to not recognize him and even to reject him.

Kent Hughes tells about a poor family that “was farming some land during the Depression. There was one son in this family, and the parents wanted the best for him. So they scrimped and saved so they could send him away to college. After he had been gone for a year or so, his parents, who loved him very much, wanted to see him again. Again they saved, sold some things, and went to visit their son. They arrived on campus, poorly dressed in their farm clothes. Seeing their son with some other boys, the father ran over to him. ‘Son, son, it’s your father,’ he said. The son looked at his father without showing any sign of recognition. The father said again, ‘Son, it’s your father and mother. We’ve come to see you.’ The boy, perhaps embarrassed by his parents’ poverty, turned to the other students and said, ‘I don’t know who this is. He must be crazy.’ How absurd, how horrible,” says Hughes (26). Not only so, but as I read this I thought how this ungrateful boy, by his shameful denial of his parents, would surely forfeit any of their continuing financial support!

Yet Christ experienced an even more unthinkable rejection. As Kent Hughes says, Christ continues to be unrecognized and rejected by those whom he has created and who would be incinerated by his glorious appearing (26). And each one of us must admit that before grace taught our hearts to fear and led us to believe, we too had tried to ignore him and his claims and we had rejected his love for us. But he gave us the opportunity for...

The response of reception

John says that on the other hand there were those who did receive Jesus, as he continued in verse 12.

Obviously, those who received him first of all recognized him as the Son of God. Faith begins in the eyes, the mind, and the imagination. Imagination brings recognition of our condition and how things could be different for us.

I heard a testimony recently from a lady who shared how that as a teenager when she heard the good news about Jesus she immediately “saw” how her life could be different. Because all she had ever known was a life captive by sinful addictions,

she needed to imagine how things could be different for her. Faith stirred her imagination.

In our previous pastorate in the US a man came into our church building to participate in a funeral service. This man knew my father, but had met me only once, over 30 years before, yet he immediately recognized me as Ray Roberts' son. I looked a lot like Ray Roberts did 30 years previously, which was about the last time he had seen my father.

Jesus came into the world as the exact representation of the Father. The character of God could be seen in the Savior's holiness and love. Even though anybody who had a heart to know God would have recognized his Son, his religious enemies did not. Those who should have, because of their study of the Scriptures, did not know him (John 5:39).

But there were those who did recognize and receive him—"those who believed in his name." "Recognize" (*egno*) in verse 10 is better translated "*know*." There were those who came to know Jesus as the eternal Word and Son of God. This word "to know" is a term for first-hand experience and intimate relationship. In fact, it is used in the Old Testament to describe the greatest intimacy between husband and wife. It is far more than simply intellectual cognizance.

In Genesis 4:1, for example, we read that Adam "knew" his wife Eve and she conceived and gave birth to Cain (NASB footnote). Obviously this experience of knowing was more than Adam's having facts about his wife! (Borchert, 114).

The gift of the Incarnation is the gift of Jesus, whom we must know through faith that results in a personal, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. By faith we must receive him. That word "receive" is more than just a passive acceptance. It means an eager, active welcome of Jesus into our lives as Lord and Savior, taking rather than receiving and "an aggressive act of the whole personality" (Tozer, 11f). Jesus spoke about "forceful men" who "lay hold" of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 11:12). God's gift of salvation is not something to be passive and nonchalantly received. To not lay hold of the gift of Jesus Christ is to decide to reject him. To delay the decision is to say "no" to him.

A few years ago a Flemish newspaper reported a story with the headline, translated "The First Baby Lies in Shelf." An organization called "Moeders voor Moeders" (Mothers for Mothers) provides a depository sliding shelf where mothers, unable to care for their newborns, can anonymously leave their newborns to be cared for by others and eventually to be adopted into caring and capable families. In Antwerp several years ago, the first baby was received in this "shelf/drawer" and was named Thomas, and was awaiting an adopting family. In Germany there are 80 such "schuiven" or shelves ("Wablieft," 28 November 2007, number 689, page 2, www.wablieft.be) The fact that there has to be such a provision for unwanted babies or babies born into homes incapable of receiving and caring for them is a sad commentary on society. This story reminded me of the incident of the baby left on Christmas Eve in a live nativity scene in a church yard in Texas (USA). This baby, who was nicknamed Timothy Christmas, like baby Thomas, was cared for until he

could be assigned a family. A human life cannot be thrown away or even ignored. The birth of Jesus cannot be ignored and he cannot be rejected with impunity.

To receive Jesus is to make room for him and host him as an honored guest. The gift of the Incarnation demands an immediate response. But also the greatest gift of all...

Determines everlasting results

Gifts impact us differently. A new article of clothing might help you look better or more stylish, and a winter coat will likely help you stay warm. Maybe your spouse is hopeful that the gift membership to the fitness center might encourage you to a healthier lifestyle that includes regular exercise. I think my favorite Christmas gift as a child was an American cowboy outfit, including a big hat, boots and a two-gun holster. That gift certainly helped me enjoy playing cowboys and watching westerns on television, but since I was never to become a gun-slinging cowboy or even own a horse, that gift had only temporal value.

John tells us that not all rejected the gift of Jesus. Some in fact were everlastingly changed by this gift. Verse 12 speaks about those of us who have received Jesus in a personal, life-changing relationship.

The result of regeneration

Again, we are helped by looking at the original language of verse 12, the word *exousia*. Perhaps capturing best the meaning of the Greek is the NRSV translation, which reads, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave *power* to become children of God."

Upon receiving Jesus as Lord, we are given the transforming power of God in our lives. Again, becoming a Christian is not a mere human decision. It is the work of almighty God who responds to our acceptance of his gift, and responds with his divine power to transform us into his children. The biblical view of salvation is not decision based. It is viewed as a work of God's power in the life of the believer.

The great Puritan pastor and writer John Bunyan said that since love is the main characteristic of regeneration, its absence is evidence of "ill-breeding" (345). John says you weren't born of God (regenerated) if you don't love your fellow believer (1 John 4:8).

Whoever has come to know and receive God through believing in Jesus is obviously a child ("teknia") of God. As John writes in his first letter, once again, he says "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him" (1 John 3:1).

In verses 12 and 13, John possibly "employed language suggestive of the Virgin Birth when describing the new birth of believers" (Beasley-Murray, 13). Just as people who knew my dad recognize me as his son, so should God's children

recognize you as one of his children. You know what I mean by some people whose very demeanor and attitude and conversation soon make it clear they are God's children. By that I don't mean they are cloying or superficially pious. They don't need bumper stickers nor have to wear Christian shirts and pins to identify themselves as children of God. They simply bear the Savior's likeness.

John adds that the regeneration of God's children is his work alone, and isn't a matter of "human decision," or by the schemes and wishes of parents or even a matter of our will apart from the grace of God. To be regenerated is to be touched by the power of the eternal Logos, the creator of the world and the God who raised Jesus from the grave. John the evangelist was speaking against the backdrop of a Gnostic world that believed Christianity was a matter of the acquisition of intellectual knowledge and secret truths belonging to a select group and also the "Jewish pride of race" because of great ancestry. John says all this is futile. "The new birth is always sheer miracle" (Morris, 101).

The great pastor and preacher, Harry Ironside, for many years pastor of Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, commented that verse 13 tells us we cannot become a child of God in the following ways: We cannot become a child of God...

1. By blood/natural descent, which would mean we are automatically Christians if our parents are/were;
2. By flesh/by human decision, which says we can make ourselves Christians by our own will, by trying to be better people;
3. By a husband's will/the will of man, which perhaps refers to religious practice, such as the sacraments of the church (Ironside, 30-32).

John was also addressing the religious world of the Jews who thought their strict law observance was winning merit with God. The rich young ruler wanted to acquire eternal life as part of his dossier and list of accomplishments. Jesus made it clear he had to meet the demands of a life-changing relationship with him as Lord (Matthew 19:16-30).

John issued another disclaimer against those who thought salvation was a matter of pedigree or having good connections. As some deal with the issue of salvation, they futilely hope the faith and devotion of godly parents will stand them in good stead on the Day of Judgment. Being born in a Christian home no more makes you a Christian than being born in a garage would make you an automobile.

John's reference to the futility of being regenerate by "a husband's will" could be a reference to those, like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, who thought they were going to heaven (if they were Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection) because of their human achievement and religious contributions. I have known loyal church people who were totally bereft of any evidence of saving and sanctifying grace in their lives. Their only claim to heaven seemed to be tied to their church attendance loyalty or their giving financially to the church as an institution. Their attitude seemed to be, I've done so much for God, he certainly owes me heaven. This was the attitude of Jesus' enemies who were offended to think outsiders, who had no religious merit, could enter heaven actually before they could (Matthew 21:31).

Jesus made it quite clear that such religious pride of accomplishment and “deserved privilege and earned salvation” were perilous to the soul. Jesus said that because of the graceless nature of religious pride, outsiders like traitorous tax collectors and obviously immoral prostitutes were more likely to get to heaven. Those who know they are sinners are far more likely to receive God’s grace (Matthew 21:31-32).

The Greek word in verse 11 *to receive not* uses the same word “*to receive*” that Jesus uses in John 14:3 (Robertson, 10f). There Jesus talks so lovingly about going to heaven to prepare a place for us, and then about his coming again *to receive* us to himself, so that where he is there we may be also. Jesus will receive into heaven all of us who have received him into our lives as Lord.

The gift of the Incarnation determines not only the everlasting result of regeneration, but also...

The result of rejection

Scripture is clear that everyone faces an everlasting destiny, either with God in heaven or apart from him in hell. And, the gospel presents us with a choice. The Incarnation presents the world with a choice—just as the “Moeders voor Moeders in Antwerp faced a choice with Baby Thomas and the church people in the Texas church faced a choice of responding to Timothy Christmas.

Those who fail to recognize Jesus as the incarnate Word and to respond to God’s offer of salvation will be renounced on that Day. This Jesus makes very clear. To those who did not by faith receive and know Jesus in a personal, life-changing relationship will be told by the Lord Jesus on the Day we face him, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers” (Matthew 7:23)!

Even evangelicals are waffling on the biblical teaching about hell, saying it is temporal and not eternal, and is symbolic for destruction to be understood as annihilation. But the moral justification for and even necessity of an eternal hell is clearly understood against the background of grace. Such a gift as God’s salvation through the atoning suffering and death of Jesus cannot be rejected with impunity. Hell as eternal torment makes sense only in light of the enormity of God’s gift of grace through Jesus and his provision through his ineffable suffering for us.

Some years ago I saw a press release about a heroic rescue by an African Inland Mission missionary pilot in Mandera, Kenya, where radical Muslim associates of al-Qaeda were attacking Christians and destroying their homes and schools. This pilot got word of the danger faced by Christian workers and landed his plane at a nearby Kenyan military base. He said, “We knew that if these people were calling for help it was really bad.”

Sixteen people crammed into the plane and the pilot got the plane airborne within minutes, just before shots began to be fired at the plane. The pilot reported, “I feel fortunate God allowed me to help. There is no denying that God was at work today.”

Suppose those 16 people had rejected this rescue effort, made at great risk. Of course, they would have deserved to die. But Jesus Christ didn't just risk his life—he gave his life and came into this world knowing he would suffer our eternal hell so we could be rescued from hell. To reject his eternal, costly gift, is to deserve an eternal punishment.

Conclusion:

What's the greatest gift you have ever received? Some gifts have more of an impact on us than others, which may soon be spent or forgotten.

For you who don't know him, what a great opportunity you have to receive Jesus into your life. The one who loved you and gave himself for you is worthy to be received into your life. Your presence here today and your attention to the Word of God is evidence he is calling you to himself. The risen Christ, who was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, says this: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me" (Revelation 3:20).

He's not the beggar standing patiently in line. He's Lord of lords and King of kings. He also warns about resisting his grace and rejecting his offer, and the danger of hardening one's heart against him (Hebrews 3:8; 4:7). He will come into your life as your life-changing ruler and Lord. He will receive you and remake you into his eternal child, bearing his glorious, holy and loving likeness. If you receive him now as your Lord, he will receive you into his everlasting kingdom of heaven.

Maybe today some of you are willing to ask God to reveal to you your heart. Do you know Jesus in a personal, saving, life-changing relationship? A faith that doesn't change you now won't save you then. Join us in celebrating Christmas as the reception of the greatest gift of all.

The gift of the incarnation of Jesus has been given to you. This is why Jesus came. Will you embrace him with zeal and joy? Or dare you to turn away from the greatest gift of all and say, "I don't need him. I want nothing to do with him"?

Questions and thoughts for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. CS Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, says that the incarnation of Christ is "the central miracle." What do you think he might have meant by this?
 2. Why do you think Jesus was rejected as Savior by most of his people?
 3. Had Jesus been born in this 21st Century would people have responded any differently?
 4. Recall your experience of first receiving Christ as your Lord and Savior. Now that you are a believer, do you still have to face the issue of continuing to
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receive Christ, i.e., give him first place as Lord, and seek to abide in him in close fellowship? In light of this question, read Revelation 3:20; John 6:53-58; 15:4-5.

5. What was your most cherished Christmas gift? What impact did it have on your life, and why?
6. As you celebrate this Advent Season, give thanks to God for giving you the greatest gift imaginable (2 Corinthians 9:15).
7. Pray for someone you know who needs to receive God's great gift this Christmas Season, asking God to use you to share with that person the message of God's gift as he may give you opportunity.

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