

When It Is More Blessed to Receive than to Give

By Pastor Christopher Seah

Once again, the season of giving and receiving is upon us. And without fail, our cultural air will be filled with the clashing voices of selfish consumerism and selfless giving. The former, so clearly seen in wailing children at the toy department, demands to be pleased above others. The latter, chiming loud and clear like a Salvation Army handbell, bears testimony to our Lord's words in Acts 20:35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Our Lord was not saying that we should never desire gifts. But knowing the covetous bent in all of us, an innocent desire for gifts can easily morph into greed: We will love the Christmas season simply because we get stuff. So teachers of God's Word do well to warn the children of God not to give in to greed this time of the year, or at any other time for that matter. 1 John 5:21 applies here: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

The other related problem with craving more is not so much the "more" but the "what." So often, the things for which we crave so hungrily are not even worth our passions. I, for one, have had the chastising experience of buying something, only to find myself confronted with the question: "That's it? That's all this product can offer?" We must not simply guard against greed. We must protect our souls from stressing out over things that do not last.

Given these twofold dangers, any season where gift-receiving plays a big part, whether it is Christmas, or Chinese New Year, or birthdays, always remain occasions for temptation.

But in the midst of greed-bashing, there is another danger, which lies on the other side of the proverbial ditch. While decrying the self-centered consumerism that is so much a part of the holiday season, it is all too possible that the emphasis falls back on us in yet another way: *We can forget that Christmas is not about our self-less giving either.* The phenomenon of Christmas arose not because the human race collectively decided to live for the good of one another; but because *God* gave a gift to us, Jesus Christ, to remedy our chronic self-worship. The incarnation of the Lord God in a human womb was strictly an act of grace. We could not and did not do anything to merit or cause the first Christmas to happen.

And so, we see two implications emerging from the advent of the Lord Jesus. On the one hand, Christmas mocks the earthly gifts for which we so passionately crave. God does not deem these things evil. But in comparison to his infinite glory, they are poor, weak, inferior, even trivial. On the other hand, we could also say that Christmas mocks our giving; our weak attempts at generosity; our stingy, half-hearted tokens of kindness; our giving so that we can get (a.k.a. manipulation), and all the other filthy rags of our good works (Isa 64:6).

In setting out the components of saving faith, the Westminster Confession states: "But the principal acts of saving faith are *accepting, receiving, and resting* upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the

covenant of grace” (italics mine). What does this mean? For one, it means that we should not allow whatever things we might desire distract us from the one gift that ultimately matters. God bestowed the whole of heaven to the human race in a little Baby, the darling Son of God. Christ is the One to whom all hearts must turn. And yet, precisely because Christmas centers on God’s gift, we should also not allow our giving to obscure God’s own giving. Receiving Christ is the one instance when receiving is better than giving! For it is by receiving Christ that God renews us and makes us his own.

So, do not forget the Lord of the season by being consumed either with getting earthly goods or dishing out your own good works. Both options miss the Gospel. Spend some time reflecting on the glory of Christ in Scripture. Renew your trust in Jesus again. Reach out with your empty hands of faith and receive the Lord Jesus Christ, God’s gift of life, light, and love. Allow God’s love in Christ to fill your heart (Rom 5:5). Only then can your giving be truly loving and not self-serving. Heed Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” May the Lord grant us a fresh understanding and appreciation of his free gift in Christ.