

Love is the Unexpected Gift

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Preacher: Sam Bunnell

[0 : 00] All right, well, our children can be dismissed to Children's Church at this time if they'd like to be. That's kindergarten through second grade. As they go, I want to ask you, how many of you like stocking stuffers?

Does anybody like stocking stuffers? I have an abnormal obsession with stocking stuffers. I love them. I prefer them over the presents under the tree. I really do. It's those little knickknacks.

I just love how handy they are. My favorite part of Christmas morning is when all the big presents are unwrapped and we can finally get to the stockings, man. It is awesome. Growing up, there was always a Christmas orange on top. Anybody do the Christmas orange thing?

Yes. All right. I like you. Thank you. We got one. For some reason, they always tasted better. Something about it.

Anyway, I was wondering, maybe there's a Christmas orange shop that my dad would go to and find them every year. I don't know, but they were great. That's a little bit of a rabbit trail, but I do want to get back to the stockings because I have to admit something.

[1 : 14] Over the last few years, my wife got me two of the same stocking stuffer. It's an Amazon smart plug. Anybody use an Amazon smart plug? Or it doesn't have to be Amazon.

Anybody use smart plugs in your house? Some of you are looking at me like I was when I first saw that thing in my stocking. Like, what is this and what am I going to do with it?

I'll have to admit to you, listen, I've already cleared the air with my wife, okay? That thing went in a drawer and then a couple years later, I got another one and that joined to the other one in the drawer.

I'm like thinking I'm going to get a pocket knife or a mini screwdriver set or sunglasses or, you know, new cologne that she likes.

I don't know. Something, you know, that I'm going to use, right? What am I going to do with these smart plugs? Look, I'm a terrible millennial because we're supposed to know how to use the smart plug deal.

[2 : 19] And I had a hard time with it. How could I not figure out sooner? Now, listen, I'll admit to you, this year, I finally figured out that you can plug those things into an outlet.

You can link them to your Alexa. Anybody have an Alexa in your home? Anybody have like the Google version of it? Anybody have a smart speaker type deal in your house? All right.

If you have and you're not using them with your smart plugs, you're missing out, okay? If y'all are looking for stocking stuffer ideas, go find a smart plug somewhere.

I don't know. Walmart? Ask Holly. She knows where to get them. Anyway. But I figured out you can link them to your Alexa.

And now guess what happens every morning in our house? I walk into the kitchen. That's where our Alexa is. And I say, Alexa, turn on Christmas tree. And the Christmas tree turns on all the lights.

- [3 : 18] We've got a lit up garland in our little foyer area in our house that turns on lights. And I say, Alexa, turn on foyer. And then I say, Alexa, turn on lamp.
- It's a wonderful thing. I love it. I feel like we're living in the future. Anyway. And then the boys have gotten into it. They'll tell Alexa to turn the lights on and off.
- It's great. Now I've got to collect more smart plugs. And listen, your parsonage over there, we have turned it into a full-scale smart home, people. That was on us. You didn't have to do it.
- All right. Here's what hit me. Why didn't I figure that out? Why didn't I appreciate that gift when it was given to me? Because I didn't see the value in it.
- But my wife did. The giver did. She knew that that is something that I would love to do. It just took me a while to see it.
- [4 : 17] Does that make you think of anything else? A gift that was given that maybe wasn't appreciated at first. Because the people didn't realize just how valuable it was.
- Just how much they needed it. Just how much it would bring joy and fulfillment to their lives. Now my Alexa smart plug experience has brought a tiny bit of joy and fulfillment to my life.
- But the greatest gift ever given to us brings unspeakable joy and ultimate fulfillment to our lives. That's what we've been talking about this season.
- We've been going through this series. Christmas, the gift is waiting. We've been jumping in along with the kids' Advent presentation. And kind of hitting home every Advent theme this Sunday.
- From joy to hope to peace. And now finally we're settling on love. That is the final theme of our Advent season. So let's go to Matthew's gospel.
- [5 : 20] Would you take your Bibles? If you don't have one, there should be one in the seat back in front of you. You can pull out the Bible app on your phone. Whatever works for you. But let's get everybody looking at a copy of God's word. Matthew chapter 1.
- For sake of time, I'm going to go ahead and read as you're turning. We're going to begin in verse 18 and read down through verse 25.
- The birth of Jesus came about this way. After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit.
- Only time that's ever happened, folks. Verse 19. So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.
- But after he'd considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife.
- [6 : 18] Because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son. And you are to name him Jesus. Because he will save his people from their sins.
- And all this took place. To fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet. See, the virgin will become pregnant and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Emmanuel. Which is translated, God is with us.
- Remember that song we just heard? O come, O come, Emmanuel. We lifted our voices and sang it together. And I love last Christmas Eve service. By the way, Christmas Eve service this Wednesday, 6 o'clock.
- Okay, 30 minutes and we're out. It's going to be great. We're going to have a good time together. Last year at Christmas Eve, we all gathered and sang, O come, O come, Emmanuel. And we closed with the words, Emmanuel has come to you, O Israel.

He did come. God is now with us. So this is the first time that we hear it. And Joseph hears it directly from this angel.

[7 : 23] And then he wakes up in verse 24. And he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. And he married her. And he didn't even have marital relations with her until she gave birth to the son.

And he named him Jesus. Right in the middle of that story. We see something that Joseph had to learn the hard way.

Maybe he didn't fully appreciate it at first. Until God had fully revealed to him just how precious this gift was. Had to blow his mind.

Mary, this sweet, precious fiancée that he was planning on spending the rest of his life with, suddenly became pregnant. He knew it wasn't from him.

His world was rocked. She cheated on me? She was unfaithful to me? What in the world? But he did not want to go and have her suffer the consequences, which ultimately would be stoning for being unfaithful to her espoused husband-to-be.

[8 : 29] So he kept it quiet. He was going to protect her even though he thought she had committed this great sin. He was going to divorce her quietly. But he had to learn this truth.

That number one, God's love rarely arrives in the way we expect. But it always arrives in the way that we need. How many of you can testify that God's love or his expressions of love or his blessings to us have rarely come in your life in the way that you expected, but always in the way you needed?

Can you just wave at me by testimony? Yes. That's what, listen, that's my testimony as well. What I expected from God was rarely what happened, but it was always, with the benefit of hindsight, what I needed.

And that is a truth that Joseph had to learn. It's a truth that all of us have to learn. Crystal Evans Hurst said, I serve a God who loves to give us gifts we aren't expecting.

By the way, if you're wondering who that is, that was a well-known pastor down in Dallas, Tony Evans, that's his daughter. I serve a God who loves to give us gifts we aren't expecting.

[9 : 39] Boy, God is a God of surprises, isn't he? He's a God who catches us off guard. He often does things we aren't expecting. He certainly sent the Savior of Israel in ways that they were not expecting.

What were they looking for? Anybody know? Say it louder. King! That's right, Taylor. Good job, buddy. They were looking for a king.

They were looking for a conqueror. They were looking for a warrior, someone who would defeat Rome and free them from Roman occupation and allow them to have the fulfillment of their kingdom on earth.

God's people are going to rule the world. That wasn't God's plan. He said, yes. God's people are going to rule the world in the end, but it's going to be according to my timeline.

It's going to be according to the kingdom that I set up. It's not going to be right now. All they could see was their immediate problem, their immediate distress, and they said, God, send us a king.

[10 : 42] They did that in the Old Testament, didn't they? When God's prophets were the ones who would hear from God and they would legislate among the people, but that was not enough for the people. They said, we need a king.

We go out and we see all these other nations with their own king. We don't have anybody. All we have is these prophets. God finally gave them a king. And if you've studied up on the house of Saul, boy, that didn't work out very well, did it?

We always have our ideas of how we're going to get past the problems that are facing us, these immediate problems that we can't see around, and we can't figure out a way under them or over them.

We can't figure out how to get through this. And so God's love and his answers and his solutions often rise in the ways that we least expect, but they're always in the ways that we need.

Isaiah 55. God explains a little bit of his reasoning for this. He says, look, my thoughts are not your thoughts. Your ways are not my ways. This is the Lord's declaration.

[11 : 51] As heaven is higher than earth, my ways are higher than your ways. My thoughts are higher than your thoughts. If you want it in the New Testament, Paul writes a little bit about this.

He says, brothers and sisters, consider your calling. Not many are wise from a human perspective. Not many powerful. Not many noble birth. Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

He's chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He's chosen what's insignificant and despised in this world. What is viewed as nothing.

Maybe a little baby born in a manger. The most insignificant thing. To bring to nothing what is viewed as something.

No king could surpass what Jesus brought to God's people. All their efforts.

[12 : 52] All their human capabilities. Paled in comparison to God coming to earth. This was his solution.

And it was exactly what we needed. But it wasn't what we expected. And so I want to leave you with this thought. From point number one. Love may surprise you.

But it never fails you. Love may surprise you. But it never fails you. In the time honored passage.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 13. We call it the love chapter. We get to read all about love. And at the very end. It has all these attributes of love.

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love doesn't think evil of someone else. And at the very end of this list. On the power of love. Shown in the son of God himself.

[13 : 48] Jesus. It says these words. Love never what? Anybody know? Let's say it together. Ready? Love never. Love never fails.

Love didn't fail when Jesus came. Even though they had no room for him. And it said. Oh no. What are we going to do? There's no place for Mary to have the baby.

Even when Joseph was faced. Even before that. With this idea that his fiancée was unfaithful. And now she's pregnant. Oh no. What's going to happen? No.

This was all part of God's plan. She was never unfaithful to Joseph. She had no sin in this situation. So. King Herod tried to stamp it out.

Didn't he? Tried to go around and have all these baby boys killed. But God rescued him. Love would not fail. Love would not fail.

[14 : 43] When the Pharisees. The Sadducees. And the religious leaders of the day. Tried to silence Jesus and his teachings on this earth. As he grew up. And started fulfilling God's mission for him.

During his 33 years on this earth. But love didn't fail then. He shamed them and silenced them at every step. Still showing them the love of God. Love did not fail.

When they got the Romans involved. And they finally arrested him. And put him on the cross. And had to suffer this terrible death. And it looked like love had finally failed.

But it didn't fail. And as a church. As the followers of Jesus. Easter has such a special meaning for us. Y'all I think Easter and Christmas. Just go hand in hand. It's the beginning of God's story on earth.

And it's the end of Jesus' story on earth. But it's the beginning of our story. With him. Because love did not fail. And Jesus did rise from the dead.

[15 : 41] You and I get to wake up every morning with hope. You and I get to wake up every morning and say. God is alive. He hears me when I pray. He's going to lead me. He's going to guide me. He's going to be with me.

He's going to protect me. He's going to comfort me. He's going to give me fulfillment. And joy on this earth. Because I know that he lives. My redeemer lives. So the way love comes.

Might be unexpected. It might be surprising. But it will not fail. Number two. God's love came. Wrapped in weakness.

So it could reach us. In our weakness. Now look. I've recently started going to the gym again. I know y'all can tell. That was a joke.

I haven't been going long enough to really make you tell. Anyway. I am reminded every time I start pushing weight around. Of how weak I am.

[16 : 40] Wow. And I'll see people that have been doing this for a while. And I'm like man. I should be able to lift what he's lifting over there. But I am weak. Look the reality is.

We are all weak. You might have been going to the gym for a long time. You might be physically strong. Some of these football boys. Some of these other athletes. Jaylee Tiller is sitting back there.

She's probably one of the strongest people in the state of Texas. All right. Some of these people are really strong. But there are other ways that you are weak.

Every one of us are weak on the inside. One of the greatest Christians who ever lived was Paul. And he said I am weak. And it's good that I'm weak.

Because in my weakness God gets to show his strength. You all have a weakness. I have my weakness. It might be areas that we fall to temptation more regularly than anything else.

[17 : 42] Somebody might have an addiction as a weakness. Somebody might have a weak mind. And the devil gets in there. And he exploits it. And he fills you with fear.

Every one of us. Our flesh is weak. But God's spirit. Is strong enough. Scripture tells us this.

Where sin abounds. Not just where sin is present. But where sin starts to take over. Where sin overflows in you.

By the way there is an area in your life. At least one. Where sin overflows. And the people around you know. What those areas are most likely.

The people around you experience it. They feel when you're moody. They feel when everything's not okay. Where sin abounds.

[18 : 43] You know what the follow up to that is? God's grace. Much more abounds. God's grace is able to help you win the battle over those areas.

God's grace is able to give you victory that he already won. When he hung on the cross. He was buried in the grave. And then in God's power he raised him up. To life.

Eternal. And now he offers you that same kind of life. But it's not just a living forever. It is living forever. With God's fullness. We talked a couple weeks ago about shalom.

About the completeness. The wholeness. Of peace. That God wants to offer. Every one of us. He says you find this. In me. This is what he's talking about.

When he says grace. Abounds so much more. In those areas where sin. Abounds. That's your weakness. That's your weak areas.

[19 : 46] That's the places that you can't be strong. Come on. Just be strong. It's like speaking to a rock and say. Fall down.

Break apart. Can't do it. Without God's power. Now with God's power. In the Old Testament. We read of Moses grabbing his rod.

And striking a stone. And water comes out of it. God has power over all of it. But God can't make your weak areas strong.

Unless you let him. He uses our faith. He uses our faith. So you don't have to win the battle over your weakness. But you have to have faith enough to let him give you the victory over your weaknesses.

I've seen that in my life. I believe and I know for a fact that many of you have seen that in your life. So I pray that by God's spirit you would look inward.

[20 : 46] In the next few minutes as we prepare to close. And say God what are my weaknesses? What are my weak areas? There might be something that pops in your head right away. I know what that is.

There might be more. That God wants to bring up and say listen. You struggle with doubt. You struggle with self-confidence. You struggle with trust. There might be all these different areas that are true weaknesses.

That are not only holding you back from the life that God has for you. But they're also affecting others within your realm of influence. But God's love came wrapped in weakness.

A little baby. Jesus couldn't do anything in that moment. He set aside his throne. He set aside his power. Read about it in Philippians. And he came down and allowed himself to be vulnerable.

Allowed himself to enter this world as the weakest of all creatures. So that we could identify with our weaknesses. And Paul teaches us there's nothing that we would experience.

[21 : 55] No temptation. No failure. No weakness. That we would experience on this earth that Jesus didn't also taste. That Jesus didn't also experience. He came wrapped in weakness.

So he could reach us in our weakness. Would you go over with me to Philippians chapter 2. Philippians chapter 2.

For sake of time I'm going to go ahead and read verse 5. Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus. I referenced this just a moment ago. Who existing in the form of God.

Did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he gave it up. He emptied himself. By assuming the form of a servant.

A human. Taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man. Verse 8. He humbled himself. By becoming obedient to the point of death.

[22 : 55] Even death on a cross. The most shameful death possible. Reserved for the worst criminals. 2 Corinthians chapter 8 and verse 9.

We've got it on the screen. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus. Though he was rich. With all that God has. For your sake.

For my sake. He became poor. He wrapped himself in weakness. So that by his poverty. You. And I.

Might become rich. Rich in the fullness of God. Rich in hope. Rich in joy. Rich in peace. Rich in love.

These are the themes of Christmas. They're the themes of what we call the Advent season. This is what God offers to us. This is what God is full of. This is where we find these things.

[23 : 51] In God alone. And he offers now richness. He said trade your poverty. For my richness. Trade your weakness. For my strength. I will come down and identify with you.

And show you how you can do this. How you can have faith in me. How you can follow this new way. That goes against everything you're being taught. In this world. In this world. So I'll leave you with this thought.

The perfect gift. May not have. The prettiest wrapping. I don't know about y'all. The kids like to go look at. The presents under the tree. And you know.

My kids certainly wouldn't count. How many presents do I have with my name on it. And how many presents does. He have with his name. They wouldn't do that. Except that for that reason. We had to go change the names on the boxes.

To Santa's reindeer. So we've got Donder. We got Blitzen. We got Comet. We got Cupid. It's great. So they have no idea. And Austin keeps bartering with me. Trying to figure out.

[24 : 52] So which one is which. I'll play in this game. And whoever wins. You have to tell me which of these. Like nope. Not going to work man. You'll find out Chris this morning. Because they judge what's inside.

By how good they look. How many there are. Listen. The perfect gift. May not look perfect on the outside. It may not be dressed up in the prettiest wrapping.

Jesus was the perfect gift for God's people. But he didn't look like it when he came. God's presence. Or will in your life.

Life will be perfect for you. But it may not look perfect. When you first hear of it. When you first taste it.

Might be difficult. Might take you through a trial. Might be tough. I've experienced that. I know many of you have. But it's perfect.

[25 : 52] It's exactly what you need. It will offer everything. That your heart is yearning for. And you don't even realize. Everything that your heart is yearning for. But God knows.

He designed you. He created you. And he's got the perfect gift for you. Number one. In his son. Number two. By increasing your faith in him. As you live. This life with Jesus.

As you walk. The Jesus way. The perfect gift. May not always have. The prettiest wrapping. These texts.

From Philippians. From 2nd Corinthians. Even back in Isaiah. And 1st Corinthians. They remind us. That Jesus humbled himself. He became poor. He stepped all the way down.

From heaven's throne. To earth. To show us. That he could lift us. All the way up. The perfect gift. May not have. The prettiest wrapping.

[26 : 49] When you put all this together. Understanding that. God's gift of love to us. May not always be what we expect. It may not be. Come in a way that. We would even appreciate.

At first. Like those smart plugs. I didn't even appreciate them. At first. But the surprise of it. The unexpectedness of it. And the weakness of it.

You begin to see. What Christmas. Is really. All about. A few weeks ago. We looked at hope. That waiting. Is not. Wasting.

We looked at peace. That Jesus brings a truce. To our troubled hearts. We looked at joy. That canceled debt. Frees us.

To do the same. For someone else. And today. We realize. That the gift of love. Does not always look. Like what we think we wanted. But it is. Exactly what our soul needs.

[27 : 47] Every. Time. Hope. Peace. Joy. Love. They're waiting for you. Receive. God's gift. This day.

Would you bow your heads. And pray with me. God. This is what we pray. Over this. Group of people today. We pray it over this church. Over this community. That you would fill.

Us. With hope. With peace. With joy. And with your love. You even write in the scriptures. That all the other commandments. All the other. Attributes of you.

Come from this one. Which is your love. That's how we're able to have a relationship with you. That's how the bridge is able. To be crossed.

God in our sin. We can't approach you. In our sin. We have no relationship with you. But because of your love. You died on the cross.

[28 : 44] You rose from the dead. And you made a way. For that gap. To be bridged. It's by your love. Because of your love.

We get to offer love to others. Because of your love. We get to have hope. Because of your love. We get to experience peace in our souls. Because of our love. Your love for us.

We get to have joy. Help us to have a hopeful. Peaceful. Joyful. Loving Christmas this week. We ask it in your name.

Amen. With your heads bowed. And your eyes closed. Would you remain seated. In the moments we have left. I would love to spend a time. Of just quiet prayer. If you need to slip out.

Slip out. If you can. If you can wait. For whatever needs to be done. Try to keep your seat. In this moment. Open your heart. To Jesus.

[29 : 43] The one who came. The one who humbled himself. Wrapped himself in weakness. For you. Open your heart. To the Christ child. Savior of the world.

Say God. Teach me what you want to teach me. Show me my weaknesses. I want to trade them for your strength. Thank you for identifying. With my weakness. Ask a couple of questions.

First of all. There's somebody here. Who would like to make the decision. This morning. To place their faith in Jesus. Say I want to follow Jesus. I believe. I choose.

His forgiveness of my sins. Put all my faith in him. If that's you this morning. Would you slip your hand up. I'd love to pray for you. Love to pray with you. And talk with you.

A little more about that. Thank you. As a follow-up question. How many of you would say. God is working on my heart. Maybe there's a weakness.

[30 : 51] Maybe there's something that I need to hand over to him. Maybe I just need to be filled with gratefulness. Or appreciation. For what he's done with me. And I want my Christmas this week.

To reflect that. How many of you would say. God's working on my heart right now. Slip your head up. And I'll pray for you as well. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. God you see these hands. But better than I do. You know so much more.

Of what's going on in their hearts. You know intimately. What we're thinking. What we're struggling with. I pray that your peace. Would surround them. That you would wrap them. In your arms.

Fill them with the joy. That comes. From fully grasping. What you've done for us. What you offer us. And how you're here for us. In every moment. Let their Christmases.

This season. Reflect. These four themes. These four gifts. That you've given to us. It's in Jesus name we pray. Amen.