



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What Do You Give the One Who Has It All? Micah 6:1-8; Luke 7:36-50

For several weeks now, the clothing stores and home improvement franchises have been bombarding us with ads pitching ideas for the perfect gift for dear old Dad. If you take their messages to heart, you will believe that Dad wants every tool and gadget available so he can completely remodel the house, spruce up the yard, and grill a four course gourmet meal at the end of the day all the while looking like a fashion statement out of GQ magazine. Certainly that is what we fathers want. Who in the world would choose the alternative of spending the day in his most comfortable clothes, lounging on the sofa, being waited on hand and foot, and having all of your favorite foods served to you in front of the TV? Certainly no dads that I know!

What do you give Dad for Father's Day? It is a tough problem especially when there is really nothing Dad needs. When I was young, our Vacation Bible School was always held the week before Father's Day which meant we always created a homemade gift for Dad. Over the years my father received a finely crafted plywood tie rack with little dowels glued into it, a little wooden tray for holding change and keys, and a huge plaster of Paris eagle with a wing span of about three feet. When he got it, he immediately hung over our fireplace, but come to think of it, I haven't seen that eagle in probably 45 years or so. I'll have to check on that artistic masterpiece the next time I am home!

I do think that the handmade gifts of children are the best presents a father can receive. They are the gifts that are kept and treasured for years. In particular, I like the little coupon books that promise a back rub, an extra chore done, or a hug. And there is no expiration date. In fact, I think I have a few coupons remaining that I just might redeem.

For all you fathers, whatever you receive this year: homemade gifts, shirts, ties, belts, another wrench set, or an electronic gadget that you will never figure out how to use, I hope your Father's Day will be filled with happy memories and the abundant love of family.

If you think choosing a gift for Dad is a challenge, what gift would you give to God, the Parent who really does have everything? This is the dilemma that the Israelite people faced when struggling to sort out their relationship with God nearly three thousand years ago. The people had forgotten God's saving act of freeing them from slavery, his protection in the wilderness, and his gift of their homeland. Along with other prophets like Isaiah and Amos, the prophet Micah recognized that God was frustrated with his people over their lack of faithfulness. The prophet mocks the people and says, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Their attitude is evident in their sarcasm because the people believe there is nothing they can do to please God. If the burnt offering of a calf won't satisfy God, how about if I give my firstborn child to atone for my sin? It is the oldest trick in the book children use to make excuses for not doing what they should do: place the blame on the outrageous expectations of the parent. In their case, what can you give God? What does God need? What gift could possibly be pleasing to this bigger than super-sized Father?

Like an understanding mother who knows that instead of an expensive new iPhone, Dad will be absolutely delighted with the crayon-smear, homemade greeting card, the prophet Micah gently answers this hypothetical lament, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

When my children would ask me what I wanted for Father's Day, birthday, or Christmas, I would often answer, "Just give me a Chinese meal." I was referring, not to sesame chicken with egg roll (Although I do love it!), my allusion was to a Chinese dish Deborah and I often ordered during seminary days which was called "The Happy Family." Give me a happy family and all of my other needs are met.

Micah reminded the Israelites that even God's desires are quite simple. All God wants is the love of his children and a happy family. In order to give that gift to God, they had only to do three simple things: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

It sounds simple but we all know justice, kindness, and obedience to God are not necessarily easy. In many cases, it is far easier to whip up an

order of stir-fried chicken and rice than it is to get everyone in the family to get along. Apply that wish on a global level and it seems practically impossible.

Jesus knew firsthand how hard it is for folks to get along. He grew up in a family with parents and brothers and sisters. Surely there were crossed purposes and bruised feelings from time to time. He also knew how hard it is for children in God's family to get along. On one occasion, he was invited to a dinner party at the home of a prominent Pharisee named Simon. As he took his place at the table, a woman came in from the street, kneeled at his feet, and began sobbing. She used her tears to wash the dust off his feet, rubbed her hair over them to dry them, and then refreshed them with the expensive oil she had brought with her. Such a bold act would be unheard of today, but houses then were much more open and the intrusion of outsiders was common in that day and time.

She was not welcome there, however, and, truth be told, neither was Jesus. In one of those unexplainable moments in the Gospel, Jesus reads Simon's mind. He is like the grandmother who can read body language and expressions to know every thought that passes through your mind. He tells a brief story of two people who were indebted to a creditor. One owed ten times the amount of the other. The creditor forgave both debts and Jesus wondered which of the debtors would love the creditor the more. Without hesitation, Simon answered that it would be the one with the greater debt for he had received a greater gift. Jesus agreed and then nodded toward the woman who is identified as a sinner. Everyone at the table knew this woman had an obvious debt of sin but Simon felt that he was essentially sin-free. She is the greater debtor, Jesus told Simon, and has received the greater gift of forgiveness. Thus she has demonstrated her great love for me. On the other hand, your actions (or lack thereof) have indicated your low regard for me. You did not offer to wash my feet (a basic tenet of hospitality) while she has washed them with her tears and dried them with her hair. You did not welcome me with a kiss (another act of hospitality) while she has ceaselessly kissed my feet. You did not offer to anoint my head (a third act of hospitality) while she has anointed my feet. She has shown me great love while you have shown me little to no love.

Simon's dinner party was certainly not one at which a happy family was gathered around the table. It did, however, demonstrate what Micah had prophesied centuries before. Heartfelt gratitude, genuine kindness, and natural affection are all that God desires. Do justice, love kindness, walk

humbly with God. Who more than this woman demonstrated the gift God truly desires?

Do justice: do what is right. Why is it so difficult for us to choose the right course of action? It is because competing needs and desires get in the way. As we discussed last week, there is a constant tug of war going on around us at all times. To do what is right, we have to be honest about the facts, clear about our options, and aware of the results of our choices. We often know in our hearts what is the right thing to do. All we need is the courage to do it. Justice is recognizing the dignity inherent in another person and acting to protect it. Jesus had the courage not to shoo this woman away but to acknowledge her desire to turn her life around. He accepted her as a child of God and offered her grace. Simon would have sent her angrily away and back to her life of sin. Who offered justice? Who did the right thing?

Love kindness. Being from the South, hospitality is natural. It is something we are taught from the cradle. Let kindness flow from your life like water from a fountain. Be kind to one another and go out of your way to make someone else feel special. The Hebrew people had a clear code of hospitality which intended to demonstrate kindness to one another and to guarantee that strangers were treated with respect. Over and over, however, Jesus ran up against the refusal of some people to be hospitable to others. As with this woman, he constantly reminded his followers to remember that each and every person is a child of God. He pointed out to Simon that he should never consider himself better than someone else for the very thought of his superiority over another person immediately puts him beneath them. Instead, we are to engage one another as if we are in the presence of Christ himself—for indeed we are.

I was moved by the story of the motorist who offered a biker a ride during the storm in Raleigh on Thursday. The biker kindly refused, but the man in the car kept looking in the rearview mirror to see if the biker was okay. When he saw a tree fall near the man, the driver went back to check on him and discovered that the tree had fallen on him. His Samaritan-like action may have saved the man's life. In addition, he visited the man in the hospital and, since he is a biker himself, offered to help replace his bicycle when he has recovered and is ready to ride again. Love kindness—which really means love other people enough to be good to them.

Walk humbly with your God. Each and every one of us is the woman in this story of the dinner party, but we often act as if we are Simon. No one

among us deserves the grace which God so freely offers. Second chances are a gift as are third, fourth, and fifth chances, but they are not to be squandered or taken for granted. Forgiveness of sin is not a license to sin again. It is an invitation to change directions, to do things differently, to move closer to the person God knows you can be. In deep gratitude to God for his grace toward us, we ought to do all that is possible to live as God wants us to live. After all, it is not God's desire to chastise us for wrongdoing all of the time. God wants to help us become the men and women, boys and girls that he imagined us to be in the first place. Walking humbly with God is quite simply taking the place of the woman keeling at Jesus' feet and discovering that God raises you to a place of honor because of your humble faithfulness. It is to love God with our entire personality: heart, soul, mind, and strength.

We want to give our earthly fathers the best gifts that will indicate our love and appreciation. Sometimes it is difficult to find just the right gift. What can you possibly give your Heavenly Father who has the world, the entire universe, at his beck and call? The best gift is the one thing God cannot get on his own: a happy family, a world of people who treat one another rightly, who are kind and considerate, and who love God with all that they are and have. There is no "thing" we can give God. Sacrifices are passé. Keep your children and teach them to be just, kind, and faithful. Keep your children and together move the world toward becoming a happy family, loving toward one another, and committed to God. Amen.

June 16, 2013

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of grace and truth, your word tells us that you are like a parent who guides and corrects, who protects and nurtures. We praise you, O Lord, because we have been called to be your children, heirs of a covenant you established so that we might live in loving relationship with you. You have offered us your mercy and surrounded us with your love. You have filled our lives with gracious gifts that bring joy and abundance to our days. You have granted us opportunities for work and play, for worship and service, which bring meaning and purpose for us and for those whose lives we touch. For these and all of your generous gifts, O God, we offer our thanks and praise.

In this week that we have set aside to focus on and teach our children, may we be reminded that you have called us to have a child-like faith. Help us to love our children as purely as you have loved us, to care for their needs as completely as you have cared for us, and to share with them the gifts of wisdom and freedom and dignity with which you have blessed us.

God of mercy, on this day when we show appreciation for our fathers, we are thankful for those who have loved and nurtured us, for the fathers who have helped to prepare us for the living of this life and have taught us well the lessons we will need for the journey. We mourn with those who have been separated from their fathers by death or because of a broken relationship and pray for healing to begin. We pray for comfort for those who see their aging fathers in poor health and feel helpless to relieve their pain. May we all seek ways to strengthen our bonds, and with your guidance, build relationships that will be a strong and positive influence in our lives, in the lives of our children and in the life of this community. Guide us now for the facing of this hour and for the living of our days, that we might reflect your mercy to all who need to know of the good news of your love for them and for us all. In the name of Jesus the Christ, our Rock and our Redeemer, and through the power of your Holy Spirit we make our prayers this day and every day. Amen.

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