

“Presents of the Lord’s Presence!”—Philippians 4:4-7

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Presents of the Lord’s Presence!”, is Philippians 4:4-7 → *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

“I have many friends. When they arranged to have a celebration in honor of My birthday, I was greatly pleased! One likes to be remembered by one’s friends and celebrations are gratifying events. Moreover I heard that extensive preparations were being made for presents to be given. This made Me especially happy, for My needs are great—or rather the needs of the others for whom I am giving My life are many—and in my present circumstances are dependent on what My friends are doing. You may be sure that it was with kindling emotions and welling gratitude that I looked forward to the day when I was to be so singly honored with a great party and with gifts!

"The great day came. A vast number had remembered it, and My name was on almost every tongue! Presents also came in such profusion that I was almost overwhelmed at the sight of them!! But when I looked at the cards on which the names were written, indicating those to whom the presents were given, I was astonished and amazed. I could not find My name on one card! My friends were giving presents back and forth to one another in hectic complexity! But I, Whose birthday was the occasion of the party, was strangely forgotten. I walked about, enjoying the occasion as best I could, watching the happiness of others. But what a loneliness I felt, and I wondered how I would meet those needs which I had thought the presents would supply.

"I am the Christ Whose birthday people celebrate by giving presents to each other but not to Me." —Author Unknown

This reading makes quite a point, doesn't it? We do go headlong in hectic complexity trying to get all of the preparations made for the celebration of Jesus' birth, including the giving of presents to one another. It brings us to consider the question: How much of our giving of presents actually reflects the Christ Whose birthday we are celebrating?

Such a question forces me to consider how easy it is in all that we do to prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth to really lose sight of the Christ, the incarnation, the real meaning of Christmas. Contrary to the many programs

which the media throws our way, the real meaning of Christmas is not a “spirit of giving” or a “spirit of loving” or a “spirit of kindness.” It’s more concrete than that. It’s about God Who comes into your sinful, messed up life and does something about it! In the process, He gives you His “presents” in the midst of His presence!

Our text is talking about presents which we receive as a result of the Lord’s presence in our lives. Verse 5 reminds us: *The Lord is at hand* or near. When many people hear such a statement they may think about the day upon which Jesus will come back to pronounce judgement upon all mankind.

However, when our text says that *the Lord is at hand* it refers to the nearness of the Lord Jesus Christ as something which is a **present reality** for us through faith in Jesus Christ! The Lord is near us in the sense that He is in our lives in a very real way! Jesus’ 2nd Coming must always be viewed in relationship to His first coming when He came with His presence into people’s lives to bring about our salvation. It is also a matter of His coming into our hearts and lives daily through His Word and Spirit.

Ephesians 2:13 tells us that we *who once were far off* from God because of our sin *have been brought near by the blood of Christ*. We celebrate because Jesus came into our lives through His incarnation on that very first Christmas to fulfill everything that was necessary for us to receive a “present,”

that is, the “present” of salvation through His suffering, death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins! It’s a gift, a present! That’s what grace is all about!

Ephesians 2:18 tells us that *through* the presence and work of Jesus we . . . *have access in one Spirit to the Father*. As a result of the nearness of Jesus in our lives and hearts **today** through the power of His Holy Spirit we have received “presents”—gifts of the Lord’s presence! From this perspective our text presents us with some of the “presents” of the Lord’s presence in our lives, namely joy, reasonableness, prayer and peace.

In verse 4 we are commanded to use the “present” of the joy that we have received: *Rejoice in the Lord always*. This is not just a happy feeling because the family is together for the holidays. This is more than feeling happy because everybody is supposed to be happy at Christmastime. Notice it is a joy **in the Lord**. Jesus described this joy on the night before His impending suffering, death and resurrection. He said to His disciples in John 15:11 → *These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full*.

He described a joy bound up in our eternal home in heaven which no one can take away from us, no matter how unhappy we may be here in this life, no matter how much struggling or suffering we encounter! There is a

difference between happiness and joy when it's a joy *in the Lord*. This was the *good news of great joy . . . for all the people* proclaimed with the presence of Jesus at His birth! (cf. Luke 2:10)

At Christmas we try to bring joy into the lives of others through cards, presents and greetings of various kinds. We express joy through Christmas parties and other get-togethers. However, the “joy” that we try to create doesn't even come close to the gift of joy which we have through faith in Jesus! A joy *in the Lord* is eternal and no one can take it away from us!

In our text we are also commanded to use the “present” of *reasonableness* we have received from the Lord by letting our *reasonableness be known to everyone*. (cf. Verse 5) What is *reasonableness*? The literal definition of this word in the Greek is “a person who does not insist on using his legal rights.” It is observed by others when a person, who has the opportunity and right to speak up or express himself, willingly refrains from using that right. It has also been translated as “gentleness” and “humility.” It is closely connected to the word “forgive” which means “to give up your right to justice.”

We experience the ultimate expression of this humility in the presence of Jesus Christ. **For us, it is an activity displayed toward another person based upon the self-sacrificing love of Jesus for us sinners** as described in 1 Peter 2:23 → *When they hurled their insults at Jesus, He did not retaliate;*

when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him Who judges justly.

Our text also commands us to use the “present” of prayer to calm our troubled, worried and anxiety-filled spirits: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* (cf. Verse 6) It is not referring to being *anxious* in the sense of excited expectation (e.g. “I can’t wait till Christmas!” or “I can’t wait till we go on vacation!”). It refers to the sin of worry, also referred to as “anxiety.”

Recognizing that we have no control over all the things in our lives, our faith clings to what God has done for us in the presence of Christ’s Person and Work. He is in control and Lord over your situations, struggles, and circumstances, despite what it appears like to you at the moment. Faith simply trusts the LORD by reaching out for Him in prayer and laying all your requests before Him according to His promise in 1 Peter 5:7 → *Casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.* What a “present!”

Experiencing all of these “presents” is the result of the *peace* that you have with God because of Jesus. It’s *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.* (cf. Verse 7) This *peace* extends far beyond any concept which our limited minds can comprehend. It *surpasses all understanding* because

it is a *peace* with God which you can have only through faith in Jesus Christ! Romans 5:1 says it this way: *Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Such a *peace* is difficult to understand in the midst of your life of unrest and turmoil. There are many situations in the midst of sin and the confusion of it all where it doesn't appear like there's much peace. How many times have you seen Christmas specials, heard Christmas carols and read Christmas cards all emphasizing "peace on earth, goodwill toward men," while wondering about this "peace on earth" in the midst of so much hatred, war, quarrels, fights and discord? For many, Christmas may feel like a time for the expression of family dysfunction rather than the peaceful presence of Christ.

Faith clings to God's definition of *peace*—peace with Him through faith in Christ. You no longer have to carry the guilt of your sin because of this peace. You no longer have to fear death or the devil because of this peace. That's why you can rejoice at Christmas when you sing Christmas hymns about "peace on earth." You're not singing with some "wishful thinking" about people getting along together because you know that the presence of sin also continues this side of heaven and spiritual battles wage in human hearts every day.

Yet, you still sing about peace, rejoice and celebrate at Christmas

because you know the peace that God has brought for you and all people in Jesus, spiritually and eternally. In fact, you can even be “reasonable” with people in the midst of the high-stress celebrations that you may be experiencing this time of year because you have the peace with God in the presence of Jesus in Word and sacrament! You can even come to God with all of your concerns knowing that His constant presence **in Christ Jesus** reassures you of His continued “presents” of spiritual blessings in your life. Amen.

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights
with Whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

(James 1:17)