



Getting Is Better Than Giving

Matt Chandler – December 19, 2004

Hey, how are we? I have one job when it comes to Christmas and that's that I shop for my wife. I've got to get my wife a present, and she handles everyone else. And then on Christmas morning, I act like I knew what they were getting. And I find that that's probably pretty consistent across all lines when it comes to husbands. I have not met the guy yet who goes, "Actually, I do all the shopping and she stays at home and watches the Bowl games." I haven't found that mixture yet, but if you are them, that's awesome. Because that's not how my world works. My girl goes and gets Audrey's gifts and the family's gifts. And right now I know what Audrey's getting, but I have no clue what she's bought anyone else. So on Christmas morning, they'll be opening presents and I'll be like, "Yeah? You like that? I knew you'd love that." And I'll pretend that I was involved in the process when really I wasn't. But I do have to shop for Lauren. So on Friday, I braved the mall. So I ate lunch with a friend of mine, and we headed over to the mall. We parked like six miles away from the mall, which was the closest spot that day, and then hiked our way in. It just kind of got worse once we were in there. I found myself in a sea of humanity wondering, "What in the world are we doing?" And don't give me, "We're celebrating Jesus!" Because I doubt very seriously that any of you wandered through the battlefield that is the mall and thought, "Christ is wonderful." I just have a hard time believing that, as you elbowed and fought your way to grab the last Elmo doll, that you thought about the wonderful realities of Christ. So what are we doing here? I just took it all in, the billions of people, the huge tree. Does anyone else think it's strange that, at this time of the year, we'll pay someone \$6 to put our kids on a strange man's lap who is dressed in a costume? Any other time in the year, that's illegal, but during Christmas, we're waiting an hour and a half in line to do it. There's just this random madness that is Christmas. I'm sitting in there and I'm trying to figure out what it is we're celebrating. What is it we're celebrating as we dive deeper and deeper into debt? What is it we're celebrating as we walk through the minefield that is the mall? What is our government celebrating? They give us the day off. I can guarantee you they're not celebrating the birth of Christ. Well maybe it's Winter. Why are we celebrating Winter in Texas? I haven't worn a jacket yet. Maybe it's "Peace on Earth and goodwill towards men." There's not a lot to celebrate this year on that front. It's been a bloody, horrible year on that front. And the Earth isn't filled with goodwill. Go home and google Rwanda or Sudan, Iraq or "ghetto." The Earth is not filled with goodwill towards men. So what are we doing here?

There were these huge banners at the mall that said, "It's better to give than receive. . . get your gift cards at _____." That's just brilliant marketing. And then there was another banner over where the kids play that said, "Christmas is about giving." So for whatever reason, those signs just started haunting me. I was with a good friend of mine and he could see that my wheels were turning, and he went, "Look, if you start talking to people, I'm leaving." So I promised him that I would behave myself. But that sign bothered me

the rest of the day. We went to the in-laws, we went out to eat, we went and saw a movie, but the whole night, I'm going, "Christmas is for receiving. It's better to give than receive? I don't think that's right." I think it's better to get. I think it's better to receive. Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not talking about the ghetto trinkets under your tree right now that you're going to get bored with over the course of the next three months. I don't care what is under your tree, it will go from awesome to boring in a matter of months. That new sweater, it's just another sweater in a couple of weeks, isn't it? The funny thing about technology is that new satellite uplink daily planner/car starter that you'll get, that will be completely obsolete by the time you turn it on. They've already got something bigger, better and faster than what you got. I'm not talking about that stuff.

So what am I talking about when I say that it is better to get, that Christmas is for getting. Let me show you. Turn with me to 1 Timothy 1, starting in verse 12. The apostle Paul wrote 75% of the New Testament. He is considered in Evangelical history to be the greatest missionary our faith has ever known. But before he was the apostle Paul, he was a scoundrel, a murdering, wicked, evil scoundrel named Saul. I want to show you what he wrote here in 1 Timothy. He says this, "*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor.*" I want to stop here and show you what he's talking about. This is a self confession of, "Listen, my past was dark. I was at one time a blasphemer and a violent aggressor. I was at one time not a good man." I want to show you exactly what he's talking about, so flip over to the book of Acts. In the 1st century, the church is blowing up. History is going to tell us that thousands were being saved every day. There was this huge outpouring of the Spirit of God, so much so that you had these apostles that were getting overwhelmed with all the work there was to do. They were spending a lot of time feeding widows and orphans, and it was just pulling away from their time to study, pray and teach. So they found these other guys to do that, and there was this one guy in particular named Stephen. Stephen's job is to look after orphans and widows. That's his job. If there is a more compassionate, loving guy on Earth at this time, I'm unaware of who he is. And one day, Stephen begins to preach a sermon, and it goes horribly wrong. He just basically says, "Jesus is this. . . This is who Christ is. . . This is what Christ will do in your heart. . ." and it infuriates the people who hear his message. We're going to pick it up in Acts 7:57. He just finishes his sermon. "*But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him.*" Basically they forced him to the outskirts of town and began to pick up rocks and pelted him with those rocks, trying to kill him. The act of stoning is where they throw various sizes of rocks at you until you died. So this scene that we are reading is very gruesome and bloody. The only thing that I can think of to get it to lock in your mind is if you're old enough to remember the second L.A. riot. When they pulled the truck driver, Reginald Denny, out of his cab and began to pelt him with bricks. That will give you a small visual image. Add about a hundred to two hundred people to that scene, and you've kind of got what's happening here in the text. They began to pelt this guy Stephen with rocks. This is a guy who was taking care of widows and orphans, and he's been driven out of the city and they're pelting him with rock. Verse 58, "*When they*

had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” So they’re trying to kill Stephen, and what they learn as they begin to hit him with rocks is that they can’t get a good enough throw off, they can’t get that full range of motion because of the outer garments. So they began to take off their outer garments so they can throw better. So they’re going, “What do we do with our coats?” And Saul goes, “I’ll hold them. Kill this man. Give me your jackets.” And he begins to hold the outer garments of the men who are pelting Stephen with rocks. Verse 59, *“They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep.”* That’s a great New Testament way of saying he died. So they pelted Stephen, this man who was taking care of widows and orphans, with rocks until he died.

Have you’ve ever been a part of some kind of mob scene? Have you’ve ever been a part of something that seemed right at the moment because you were with a group of people and when you pulled back later, there’s this guilt of “I can’t believe I got caught up in that?” I think that everyone has been in that moment where what seemed logical, what felt okay, we went ahead with, and when we got home, when we sobered up, when we were back in our right mind, we’re going, “Oh my God, I can’t believe I was a part of that.” Not Saul. Saul walks away from this mob scene with no guilt and with no shame. In fact, more than ever, he wants to see that fate fall on all of those who would claim to know and love Christ. Look in Acts 8:1. *“Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.”* So he just didn’t think it was alright that they killed him; he liked that they killed him. *“And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”* So Saul doesn’t feel guilty about being a part of the mob. If anything, it breeds into him the confidence to destroy all those who would claim to love Christ, and that’s what he begins to do in Jerusalem. He persecutes the church with such venom that the Bible just tells us that it scattered the church across the entire area. He does such a good job in Jerusalem of pressing the church of Christ that he believes he’s got it down and begins to look in the area around Jerusalem and finds out that in Damascus the church looks like it’s doing real well. And that brings us to Acts 9:1. *“Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”* So he feels like he’s got the thing knocked out in Jerusalem, so he goes, “Ah! It’s doing well in Damascus.” So he goes to the governing body and says, “Give me the right to go to Damascus and do the same thing there that I have done in Jerusalem.” The council grants him permission, and he heads down the road to Damascus. If there has ever been a man on Earth worthy of a horrible death and eternity in hell, it’s Saul.

I think one way we can kind of get a grasp on that in this culture would be the Scott Peterson verdict that came out a couple of weeks ago. I have not heard anybody yet go,

“That’s not fair.” I have not heard anybody who is furious that Scott Peterson got the death penalty. I think everyone’s going, “They should televise his death. He earned that death.” I think there’s kind of an excitement that we get to kill that guy, via the government. If ever there was a man worthy of death, it’s Saul. So you’ve got this guy who has been violently attacking women and men and has been murdering and imprisoning those for no other reason except that they love Christ.

I want you to see how God responds to him. Go back to Timothy. Verse 12, *“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.”* So this is madness. This murdering, wicked, evil killer of God’s people is shown by God mercy, love, hope and he finds his soul strengthened and grace is given to him. Now this doesn’t make any sense. If ever there was a guy that would serve the kingdom of God best by being killed in some dramatic way that only God could take credit for to teach the whole world a lesson, it’s Paul. And instead of God killing him, He shows him love? “I’ll show you, you murdering thug. Come here. I’m going to love you.” To me this is so confusing, and it’s compounded by the story of Ananias and Sapphira. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira sell some land and come to the church and give 80% of it, but they lie and say they’re giving 100%. So they come in and go, “Hey, we want to give you this gift. We sold this land, and here’s all the money we made from it.” But that was a lie, so Peter goes, “Are you sure that’s all of it?” And they go, “Yeah.” And then they fall over dead. But the murdering scoundrel gets love? What in the world is going on here? What is God doing. Surely this guy doesn’t deserve to have his soul strengthened. And he’s going to go on to say, “Not only was I shown love, but I was shown abundant love.”

That brings me back to Christmas being about getting. Let’s keep reading. Verse 15, *“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”* Now I don’t know where you live, but it really doesn’t matter. If you get in your car tonight and head home, you’re going to pass somebody’s yard and in their yard, among all the lights, is going to be a bunch of white guys kneeling around something that looks like a little box in the yard. And somebody’s doll is going to be in there. It’s the manger scene. And the Bible just said that the reason Christ Jesus was born is so that God might be glorified in the salvation of sinners. But Saul? Surely it should be only middle-class sinners. It should be limited to liars and coveters, not Saul, not the murderer, not Jeffrey Dahmer, not those guys. Why would the grace and love of Christ be extended to such wicked, violent men?

Well he’s going to say why, and I think it’s one of the most weighty texts in all of Scripture. Let me read verse 15 again, and then I want to show you verse 16, because verse 16 is huge. *“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”* The

reason God saved Saul was so that no one in this room could say, "Not me. He can't save me. You don't know where I've been. You don't know what I've done. You don't know the things that I've thought, the actions that are a part of my life." God goes, "Have you ever read about Saul? Have you made it a life pattern of destroying and killing the people I say I love? No? Just drugs and alcohol? You're in. I can work with that. Let's go. Cocaine? Come on. Adultery? Come on, I can heal that. Trust me, I can heal that." So maybe tonight you're going, "Oh well maybe he was evil for that little stint of time, but I've been evil for a long time. He was bad for three or four years. Do you know how long I've been doing the things I've been doing?" The problem with that is it's going to unravel in light of the Word. What I mean by that is Galatians 1:15 says that God called Saul from his mother's womb. So while Paul is floating around in there, God goes, "I have appointed you as the apostle to the Gentiles." So history tells us that Saul was around 45 years old when he becomes Paul. So that means he walks in complete evil, wicked disobedience for 45 years. And as I look around the room tonight, I see that there's not many of you who would qualify as being evil and wicked for 45 years. Most of you have not been alive that long.

But I still haven't answered the question regarding Christmas being about getting, have I? Alright, we're pretty excited about Christmas at the Chandler household. I'll tell you why. Last year, my daughter didn't really get it. She was only 1 year old, so she just didn't get it. In all honesty, she woke up, she opened Chicken Dance Elmo, she ate a piece of paper and fell asleep on the floor. We had like 30 other packages there, and she just didn't get it. She really didn't care. So we opened all her presents and showed them to her, but she didn't care. She just didn't get it. But you know what? This year she gets it. She's been spanked anywhere between six and ten thousand times for being under the tree and partially unwrapping stuff. She's been busted a lot under there, and she gets it. And there is going to be a lot of joy in our house this year when she wakes up, comes into the living room and sees the tricycle, the toy horse and the easel that we bought her. She is going to freak out. There will be no falling asleep on the living room floor this year. If anything, we'll have to sedate her with Benadryl candy. She is going to love it, and I'm excited about it. I'm excited about her joy. And you know what? For the first time since we've been married, my wife has no idea what I got her for Christmas. I don't either yet, but I'm going to work that thing and figure it out. I mean, she has no idea what I got her. So there is part of me that is kind of excited about seeing her open up what I got her. There's this 4-5 year time period in your life where Christmas is just kind of Christmas again. I mean, you're a kid and you're so excited, but when you get later into college and early on in your single adult years, it's just Christmas, which is basically you went shopping for yourself. You just kind of go, "Okay mom, here's what I want." There's no surprise, and there's no magic. I could ask you what you're getting and you could go, "I'm getting an iPod and some new shoes." You could name for me what you're getting before you open up your gifts. There's no magic and there's no excitement. I doubt very seriously that there's going to be many 22 year olds laying in bed on Christmas Eve going, "Oh man! What was that? Somebody's on the roof!" I just doubt that there's this huge zeal in your heart about Christmas morning. But my daughter is 2 years old now, and that magic is kind of returning now. We're kind of excited again, and we're excited about what she's going to do and what she's going to like. And God help her, she's got

my ADD, so we need a stopwatch to time how long she stays excited about one gift before the other catches her eye. We're really excited about the whole thing again, but for all the joy that will come in watching my daughter and my wife open their gifts, it cannot be compared to the hope that is in Christ that all that I hate about myself can be healed and that all that I love can be eternal. That's what we're supposed to be celebrating, not that we're healed yet. There are some great stories in this room this weekend. We've got guys that have just been cleaned after years of addiction to drugs and to alcohol. There was a guy in here last night that I'm good friends with who is just not there yet. In fact, the longest he's been clean is a month, and he's struggling and he's fighting, but God's moving in him and working in him and wooing him and beginning to heal him. That's the hope that we're supposed to be celebrating, that we're not stuck in the numbness of our sin and our secrets.

But the reality is that's not what's going on here. It has kind of just become the foundation but not really the thing. The foundation of Christmas is the birth of Jesus, but that's just what it is, the foundation. And here's the problem with the birth of Christ, Christ coming into the world to save sinners becoming foundational and everything else becoming the gist. We've lived in our house up in Corinth for two years. We've had probably about 150 people come over to our house and have dinner. And you know what? No one has ever complimented our house on our foundation, ever. They've come in and went, "Oh, you use colors so well. . . Your trinkets are so cool. . ." People have complimented how Lauren decorates, they've complimented the curtains and the couch, but nobody has ever said anything about the foundation. Nobody has ever come in to our house and went, "The foundation has made all this possible." No one has ever done that. "Christ came to the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst." I don't know who I am or what I would be if Christ had not come into the world to save sinners. I don't know the state of my heart. I know the bloodline I come from. I don't know what my marriage is like. Because right now, it's full of a lot of laughter, a lot of good times and a lot of fighting. . . good fighting though, the kind that exposes how self-absorbed and wicked you are. It's always horrible when you're in it, and then it leads you on into holiness. It's just this beautiful mess that God created, right? "Let Me wire two creatures completely different and then throw them in a house together. Ha ha ha!" It's just this beautiful God revealing our hearts by making us walk intimately with them. But I don't know what it would look like without Him. Or I don't know what my relationship with my daughter looks like without Him. This is what we're supposed to be celebrating, but I dare say that, for most of us, it will be a mere afterthought. For most of us, it will be a prayer before lunch. To receive the hope that is in Christ, it's better than any gift we could ever give. To receive the hope that all I hate about me can be healed, that all that I love can be eternal, there's nothing better.

So what's my hope in all of this? Well it's going to be a crazy week, isn't it? You're either traveling or you're preparing to host some people traveling in. We've got some last minute shopping to do, don't we? Unless you're one of those anal-retentive, Franklin Covey having freak shows, we've got some work to do this week. We've got to get some groceries, we've got to get some stuff done, we've got to prepare, we've got to have the talk with our wives of "If your mom says that again. . ." We've got to get ready. Oh

might God do something in us tonight to protect us from the fringes and let us dwell on the point. To be honest, I don't even know how it's going to look in my own house. Lauren and I need to sit down and chat about what it means to make Christ central, to celebrate the hope that is Christ in our home so our daughter doesn't start getting the impression that once a year there's this great holiday where she gets to rip open a bunch of presents. So what do we do? Do we do communion on Christmas morning? Do we read the Christmas story? I don't know, but I know that it's not just going to happen and we're not going to wake up all of a sudden and do righteous things. Righteousness happens at the planning of godly men, godly fathers and husbands. Oh this week that we might not get caught up in the madness, but instead might we begin to dwell on and think through how to celebrate the hope that is Christ in us. For our young couples, might new traditions be formed. For our older men and women, might we redeem the time that we have left with our families. And then might we enjoy the gifts, the tree, the lights and the songs, but only if they remind us of the hope that is in Christ for us.

Paul ends this text in verse 17 by saying what we just sang earlier. *"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."* There are some of you in here tonight that I know very, very well. Some of you I've known for a long time. I know your story and I know where you're coming from. And there are others in here tonight that I don't know at all, and I don't know the baggage that you're carrying or the weight that you're carrying. Here's the gist of this whole thing, and if I could talk to you about what church is all about, here it is. It's not about slacks and suits and new sets of language. It's not about whether or not you drink beer or wine or whether you're a good person or a bad person. Honestly, according to Scripture, we're all bad and wicked messes. The hope that each of us have is simple; it's that Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom we are the worst. So tonight if you've walked in here with the weight of "There's no way Christ could love me. . . There's no way He could heal me. . . There's no way He could be that miraculous in me," I would say that Paul calls you a liar. So I pray tonight that you would believe that if God could save a man like Saul, He might be able to save you. Or maybe that's not it for you at all tonight. Maybe you believe that He loves you and you love Him. Maybe tonight it's that you need to be good stewards of the family that God's given you and you need to confess that you've kind of been caught up in the madness that is Christmas in the States and you haven't done a lot of thinking about how to make the hope of Christ the focus of the season. My hope is that, as husbands and wives, you'll leave this place tonight and you'll talk about what this week is going to look like. My hope is that this week is that, every time you see a light, every time you see a manger scene, every time you see a Christmas tree, you might be reminded that we have nothing to celebrate in terms of Winter in Texas, we don't have much to celebrate when it comes to peace and goodwill because the two don't seem to exist very often on planet Earth. But rather the one thing that binds us in here, whether we're white, black, Hispanic or Asian, rich or poor, smart or dumb, attractive or unattractive, healthy or unhealthy, is that Christ came into the world to save us. And that fact binds us together as brothers and sisters. It influences who we are, it affects how we live and it has saved us from some really dark places. Or maybe I should say it is saving us from some really dark places.