

The Message

Note: No sermon is the same when you read it. You miss the inflections, the understanding that you gain in the hearing. Nevertheless, the words are shared with you here.

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Scripture: Philippians 4:14-19

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(re) GIFT

Have you thought about the difference between believing in God and believing God? Have you thought about the difference between believing in God and believing in his promises?

In the Old Testament, time and again, God reminds the Israelites of what he has done and what they have experienced so that they might not just believe that he exists but believe in him as their God. This morning I want to challenge you to consider what God has done in your life. Hopefully, you received an email from me this week. In the email, I asked for your stories because we are going to be telling stories of God's provision and his guidance and his activity in our midst.

As you know, the season of autumn is one of renewal. It's one where we renew commitments. For parents, it's one of renewing our schedule and routine as our children return to school. The Israelites, too, had routines in their calendars and in their schedules. All of the routine they experienced called them to remember God and what he had done. Generally, the recollection focused on one of two things. Quite often, the remembrance focused on a time when they were *without*. If you look at the Jewish faith from the *outside*, it appears that it is a religion of meaningless ritual and rote practices.

However, the reality is that the purpose of each ritual is to remind them of what God had done in their lives. Often, in the Old Testament scriptures, the Israelites are told to remember their time in slavery. As they recalled their time in slavery, this memory would give them empathy for folks who were repressed and were the least and the last and the lost. Even in the midst of God blessing them, he wants to instill on their hearts the importance of taking the blessing he is giving them and remembering the time that they were without. In doing so, they would multiply that blessing and give it away to others.

God's ultimate goal is to reconcile the whole world to himself—and he is going to use the Israelites to do that. In the process, however, the Israelites became so

focused on their position as God's chosen people that they started to believe that the blessings that they had were solely for themselves. Because of their attitude, Jesus spends a great amount of time refuting the Pharisees and Sadducees. They would use the religion as a weight on the people so that they could not experience the life and blessing that God had for them. In reality, God's blessings are for all nations and he wants to use the Jews to give that blessing away.

This morning I want to challenge you to think about those significant things that God has done in your life. Can you remember? Can you remember a blessing you received from God this last year? Maybe, you have to look farther back. What is that moment that God did something in your life? What is that season that, maybe, you've forgotten?

At times, we all have spiritual amnesia. We focus on the difficulties that we face today and forget God's provisions. For example, the Israelites were constantly reminded of God's hand and his provisions. Not only did they remember their slavery in Egypt as a way to create empathy for others but also they were called to consider in the Passover as how God brought them out of slavery, rescued them, and gave them life.

One of the most important spiritual lessons and disciplines that we can practice is to keep in mind what God has done. As we conclude our study on Philippians, Paul ends by remembering what the people and the church in Philippi have done to bless him in the past. The passage is almost awkward. Notice in verse 17 what he says, "Not that I am looking for a reward (or gift), but so that your blessing may be acknowledged." In other words, Paul wants the Philippian church to be recognized and receive the blessing that God wants them to have.

When we experience God, that encounter is not just for our own good but also for us to re-gift. God wants us to re-gift what he has given us. Many of us are familiar with the term re-gift. At Christmas or birthdays, you may have received a "re-gift." Have any of you ever "re-gifted" a gift? In those situations, you may have given away a perfectly good item that you either didn't need or want.

However, in our scripture lesson, Paul explains that we are to "re-gift." The purpose of God's gift is that we might share that with other people. Hence, the whole point of God blessing us is so that we might bless others through what he has given us. Honestly, I'm afraid that as Christians we have become very self-focused. In many Christian circles, our relationship with God is one way. It's about "what I can get from God."

The reality is that Jesus Christ came to give us life, but he gave us that life so that we may bless other people. The first significant spiritual experience in my

life was at FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) camp when I was fifteen years old. Although I had grown up in the church and had experienced significant spiritual moments, I had never truly responded to them.

As a typical church kid, I thought I had God figured out. Since I had done more “good things” than “bad” ones, I hoped that God was grading on a “curve” and I would be okay. Nevertheless, that summer at camp I encountered Christ in a different way. Finally, I realized that there was nothing that I could do or had done that would make me a Christian—it was all about his grace.

God’s grace is a costly gift. (The best gift is a costly gift, right?) When we re-gift a present, we’re saying, “I don’t want this so I’m giving it to you.” The reality is that God’s gift of grace cost his son his life. When Jesus hung on the cross, he took our sin upon the cross and he died and received the punishment that we deserved so that we might receive the life that he wanted us to have. What more generous gift could God give to us?

In his very nature, God is generous, and he calls us to be a generous people. When we encounter that Christ that saved us, it’s not enough to say, “God, I’ll claim your forgiveness.” When we claim his forgiveness, he calls us to forgive other people and show his mercy and generosity to others. He wants us to be an example. For that reason, Paul says that the gift of the Philippian church is “a sweet smelling sacrifice, acceptable and pleasing to God” (Phil. 4:18). He continues that God has smiled on their gift because they have sacrificed. Such a gift reminds God of his very nature. The spirit of God is alive in you.

When I encountered Jesus Christ at summer camp, the first thing I did upon returning home was talk to my younger brother. I was the “big brother,” five years older than he. Therefore, I sat him on the bed and for twenty minutes I preached to him. “I got my life right and now it’s your turn.” While I was misguided in some ways, my heart was right...because I had this experience with Christ. In that moment, I tried to share the experience that I had with Jesus with my brother. For me, my experience was about giving it away—blessing someone else with the encounter with Christ that I had gone through.

This morning I want to challenge you. First of all, consider what God has done. I invite you to fill my email box up with your stories of what God has done in your life. The more we tell the story of what God has done in our lives, the more he compels us to be a part of what he calls us to be. This church is not just about activities—it’s about helping people to encounter Christ and grow spiritually. When we retell our stories, we’re like the Israelites. Retelling the story gives us power.

Also, look forward. If we are going to know where we're going, we have to know from where we've come. In this season of growth, God will do miraculous things in our lives if we look where we've been and focus our lives on where we're going.

In God's generosity, he has given us his provision to share. Whatever you have, God didn't give it to you for your own good; God gave it to you so that you could bless other people. Therefore, consider with what has God blessed you? Inventory your blessings. How has God called you to share those blessings with other people? He's given us provision to share. Notice what Paul writes in our scripture lesson:

Yet it was good of you to share in my present difficulty. As you know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel. . . not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only. (Phil. 4:14-15)

The Philippians were not wealthy; this was a poor church. Yet, they were the first church that steps up. They understood that they had a wealthy God. When we give sacrificially, God will always supply our needs.

Also, God has given us a position to shine. In a town in Austria, there is a 3,000 feet peak next to the town that blocks the sun from November to February. During this time, the village is completely dark. Because of this darkness, the population has decreased and decreased until there are only about 400 people living in this town.

The reality is that we live in a dark world that God has called us to shine a light into. Unfortunately, at times, Christians seem to be the ones who are the most angry, the most bitter, and most righteous. We have a tendency to tell everyone that we're right and convince them that they're wrong. We're pointing at the darkness and telling it that it is dark.

I've learned that people who are in the darkness don't need us to tell them that it's dark. They need us to show them that there's a light—Christ Jesus. Christ says:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your heavenly Father. (Matthew 5:14-16)

What position has Christ given you? Is it in your workplace or with your family? What position has he given you to shine in this world?

How can you bless other people? Your action may seem inconsequential, but when you shine that light. . . *that's* when we're being the church. And we then realize that God has given us the power to save.

Although I had been going to church for years, I was impacted by that FCA camp. Why? Because someone shared his faith. Brian Doyle, the shortstop for the New York Yankees, was one of the coaches at the camp. Since I was a baseball player, I always listened to whatever he said. One day he stopped baseball practice and said, "Guys, some of you have been playing church. You're living for God on Sunday in front of all your friends, but during the week, you're doing whatever you want. God calls you out of that and into something greater than that." It was as if he was talking directly to me.

God gave Brian that position, and he used it for God's glory. While no one in this room is a professional athlete, God has given you a position for his glory. How will you use it? How has he blessed you? What's God given you?

God uses little things to bless other people. My wife has this ability to take people under her wing. At our last church, Jacqueline blessed this teenaged, pregnant girl who was struggling with her family who had abandoned her. Even though we had three kids in diapers at the time, Jacqueline took Candace into our home and blessed her. Candace still calls my wife on a regular basis to tell her what Jacqueline's actions meant to her and how those acts made Christ come alive for her. Her faith came alive. My wife used her position to shine a light and it saved a life. Because of Jacqueline's blessings, Candace is walking with Jesus Christ today.

Today my challenge is for you. If you're following along in your sermon notes, you will notice three blanks...and I'm not filling those in for you. Your job this week is to fill them. Who are three people that you can bless this week? You never know what one small act of kindness can do. Amazingly, when we all bless others together, God will do what he has promised he will do. We begin to fulfill the mission, not because we have programs here at church, but because we're living for this mission. God transforms us from the inside out.

Let us pray.

God, I pray that you will **bless** everyone here today. Help us to go forth and live and shine your light in a world that is hurting and needs to know that you love them. In Jesus' name, Amen.