

Sermon Text: Hebrews 10:5-10

Occasion: Fourth Sunday of Advent, 19 Dec 2021

Obligatory Gifts?

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

⁸ When [Christ] said, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10)

In the Christmas season, having a gift exchange is basically a necessity. You could even say you are obligated to give people presents. The form of the gift can vary quite widely. It can range from the extravagant with people offering cars or houses, to the mundane where you are gifting socks and underwear, to the bare minimum with an acknowledgement of someone’s existence. Whatever the gift happens to be, we feel obliged to give gifts on Christmas. It is human nature to desire to give something of value when you expect to receive something of value. That is the essence of economics and how businesses run. You provide a good or service, and you expect adequate compensation for what you are giving. Now, many of you will say that reducing the Christmas gift exchange to a marketplace transaction takes “the spirit of Christmas” out of opening presents on Christmas morning, and you are right. Making gifts into obligations takes the heart—the love—out of gift-giving. Thankfully, the gifts your God gives to you—including the precious gift of Jesus on Christmas—are given only out of His love for you.

But let’s take a step back from Christmas and place ourselves in the realm of everyday life. We can still see that we receive many things which we have not deserved nor earned. The most fundamental of all these things is life itself. You didn’t ask for life. You didn’t earn your life. You were simply given life. Of course, your parents gave you life in a biological sense, but God intricately wove you together in the womb and numbered your days (Ps 139:15-16). As you are obliged to thank and obey your parents for giving you life, so you are obliged to God for giving you not only life but also giving you parents to give you life. This is the basic conclusion in Luther’s explanation to the first article of the Apostles’ Creed.

The first article is: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And at the close of the explanation to this article we find: All this (that is, the giving us of all things including your body and life) He does out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in [us]. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.¹

¹ LSB p 322.

Because of all that our Lord has done and is currently doing for us, we recognize that we should give something back to Him. Namely, He has given us our lives, therefore we should devote our lives to Him. Our reading for today phrases this as doing the will of God. It was the will of our Lord to give us life and it is also the will of our Lord to live perfectly within His creation. There is no greater “gift” to the God who has everything than to do exactly what He has prepared for you to do. But this is hardly a “gift” now is it? A gift is freely given, not something we are obliged to do.

Now, the life God gives to us is most definitely a free gift for the life He gives was not earned. We were not around before we had life to earn our lives. And, as such, God does not expect us to give Him back anything in return. Now you might think this is hard to believe given the amount of laws in scripture dictating exactly how we should live our lives, but those laws are not given as conditions to us receiving lives to live. Rather, the laws in scripture inform us what the lives God has given us are supposed to be. God ordained your life to be nothing but goodness and blessing to this world, therefore your life should be lived out in goodness and blessing to your God and our neighbours. If the gift of life to you was given to you on the condition you never sinned, then God never would have offered you life in the first place. He would have used His divine foreknowledge, seen that you would have become guilty of some sin, and never would have offered life to you in the first place. Yet, your Lord loves you. He rather you be found a sinner in His world than for you never to be in this world at all.

So, out of love, God has fashioned you and your life so you may live in this world according to His will. But not one of us have done His will in this world. In our lives, we have lied and lusted. We have caused pain and suffering. We have hated and ignored people around us. Sin-soaked lives do not belong in God’s world so God will take lives tainted by sin out of His creation. Although our lives were God’s gift to us, we are obliged to live these lives according to God’s will because that is the purpose God has built into our lives.

Knowing we have done wrong, we might do what a lot of people do: send an apology gift. When you have wronged someone, sometimes you give a gift as a way of saying your sorry and try to undo the awful thing you did. Maybe you said some ugly words, so you give pretty flowers. Perhaps you did something really tasteless, so you offer a box of chocolates. But are these things really “gifts”? If they are not outright bribery, they could be counted as efforts to try and restore what you destroyed. They are not gifts but obligations to restore the goodness you’ve harmed. It’s the same thing with anyone trying to do good works in the hopes of earning their way to heaven. These good works were things you were supposed to be doing in the first place. They cannot be counted as gifts. Good works are obligations due to God because they should naturally be a part of our lives.

Now in the Old Testament, you don’t see people trying to get on God’s good side with flowers, chocolates, or good works—all those things rightfully belong to God anyways. The ancient Israelites instead offered up sacrifices. There were blood sacrifices and whole burnt sacrifices.

There were sin offerings, wave offerings, drink offerings, and a lot more offerings besides. The people were sinners just like us and they were trying to give God what was obligated from them, namely: many, many offerings. However, our reading from Hebrews clearly says of God, “*You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings*” (*these are offered according to the law*) (Heb 10:8). God ultimately does not want our obligatory offerings—whether they be animal sacrifices or good works, things offered because of the Law. What God truly wants is your heart, your love freely given.

God wants all of who you are, pure and precious—free from sin and stain. God desires that you no longer be sinful but be holy and perfect in His sight. Of course, we have to be doing good works and living a good life, but none of this means anything unless your heart is turned toward God. God wants you to do His will and that means loving Him as much as He loves you. But we know how hard this can be. In fact, it is impossible for us because our hearts have been claimed by our sins. We cannot simply give the gift of our sinless lives to God like a gift on Christmas, therefore God gives to us a gift instead.

It sounds pretty odd to owe someone an obligatory gift, not give that gift, then you yourself receive a gift instead, but this is truly what happens to us on Christmas. On top of God giving us the gift of life, God gives to us the gift of eternal life in Jesus. We have not earned this gift, nor did we know how to ask for it; but, if we did, then it wouldn't really be a gift out of pure love for us, would it? Jesus is our gift freely given. No strings attached. No conditions apply. Jesus has come into the world to do away with the sacrifices and offerings in the Old Testament and does God's will on our behalf. Jesus' heart is perfect and pure, completely devoted to God and His will for us. What we could not give to our Father in heaven, Jesus offers to God in our place.

We may not have been able to do God's will for our lives, but Jesus has performed the will of God perfectly in his life. The reason why Jesus has come into this world is to gift to us his perfect life. The life that we need but could never have is given to us as a gift because of the love of God the Father and the love of Christ Jesus. God does not look upon us as sinners undeserving of life. Jesus purifies us from the wickedness that once held onto us. Our hearts appear lovely in God's sight.

And though we might be frightened when sinful habits return to us and we are tempted toward wickedness, our lives are renewed through the life of Christ. Jesus is the gift that does not stop giving. You have been made pure and holy once by Jesus and he will continue to make you holy until your sinful flesh no longer plagues you. Jesus continues to renew your heart so you may return to doing the will of your Father in heaven. Jesus' faithful obedience is credited to you. Jesus was faithful in service unto death on the cross. Because of this, God has exalted him above us all (Php 2:8-11). And now, the honorable life and death of Jesus are given to you as a gift from God. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.