

December 26, 2010

GOD'S GIFT OF PURPOSE
God's Gifts To You This Christmas
Matthew 5:13-16
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Over the past several weeks we've been considering God's Gifts to us. Today I would like to lift before you one more important gift and that is God's gift of purpose. God reveals to us several purposes for our lives in Bible. The purpose we're going to look at today is found in the Sermon on the Mount, the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, beginning at the 13th verse. Jesus said, *"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning. You're here to be light to the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this; as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light bearers you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bowl do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you up there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house. Be generous with your lives. By opening up to others you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in Heaven."* -- Matthew 5:13-16 *The Message*

Salt and light may not sound like a great strategy for reaching the world, but when you understand what Jesus had in mind, you will see just how effective this strategy can be. Salt and light have a radical influence on whatever they come in contact with. We are to be salt and light to those around us. But we need to learn to be savory salt and illuminating light rather than stinging salt and glaring light. How do we do that?

For years Lee Strobel was a very successful legal editor for the Chicago Tribune and a very outspoken atheist. For years and years he was completely turned off to the Christian faith because of the kind of Christianity he saw all around him. Eventually, God won him over and he surrendered his life to Christ. Since then he's written a number of books persuading people to believe in Christ. In one of those books he writes about the kind of Christianity that turned him off and the kind that drew him in. If we are to fulfill God's purpose for our lives and truly be savory salt and illuminating light to the world, then we need to figure out how to attract people to Christ and not repel them and turn them away.

The first kind of Christianity that turned Lee Strobel off to the Christian faith was an In-Your-Face Christianity. Strobel said he would walk down State Street in Chicago on his way to work and often there was this guy standing on the corner with an electric bullhorn. The bullhorn distorted his voice so much that it was next to impossible to understand what in the world he was saying. He would be shouting into the bullhorn with such anger in his voice. He'd be waving a Bible in the air with his

other hand. Lee thought, “If that’s what being a Christian is, who in their right mind would want to be one?” You’ve heard of drive by shootings. Strobel says this was drive by “shoutings”. The guy would scream “pull over and ask Jesus to save your soul!” We’ve probably all encountered people like that. As well meaning as they are, it’s a terrible witness. How we Christians represent Jesus to the world is very important. We are to be savory salt and illuminating light, not stinging salt and glaring light.

The second kind of Christianity that turned Strobel off was a Holier-Than-Thou Christianity. These are people who are smug in their self-righteousness. They think they’re better than everyone else. They portray themselves as better than they really are and they consider others worse than they really are. These people have an “us versus them” mentality. These people make others feel uncomfortable. Imagine going to one of their churches for worship. They’d be whispering behind your back the whole time, giving you occasional stabbing glances. They’re constantly finding fault with others, criticizing others so they can feel superior. The saying, “A Christian is one poor sinner telling another poor sinner where to find spiritual bread,” never crossed their minds. The thought, “Except for the grace of God, there go I,” never entered their heads.

The third kind of Christianity that turned Strobel off to the Christian faith was a Cosmetic Christianity. The cosmetic Christian’s spirituality is only skin deep. It hasn’t really changed the way they live. It hasn’t changed their value system or their character. They talk a good talk, but inside they are hollow and devoid of faith, like the newspaperman Strobel knew who was the most unscrupulous reporter in the city of Chicago but he let everybody know what a church going family guy he was. Or the politician who proudly proclaimed his church affiliation to all the voters but when you got him behind closed doors he was a vicious back stabber. Or the police officer who was one of the most bigoted people you’d ever meet, but he let everybody know he was in the front row every week at his church. Nothing repels people away from Christ quicker than Cosmetic Christians. They are full of hypocrisy.

If you want to be stinging salt and glaring light then practice In Your Face Christianity, or Holier Than Thou Christianity or Cosmetic Christianity. These kinds of Christians repel people from Christ every time. But if you want to be savory salt and illuminating light, which Jesus calls his followers to be, then you’ll need to practice a different kind of Christianity. If you want to wake up every morning and experience the gift of purpose that God offers to you, the purpose of being savory salt and illuminating light, then you’ll need to practice the following kinds of Christianity.

First, you’ll need to practice a COSTLY Christianity. Lee Strobel started to warm up to the idea of Jesus Christ because of a guy back in Chicago, named Ron. Ron got mixed up in a gang, tried to

kill some guy, and had to flee the country to avoid going to prison. He went to Canada for a while and then ended up in Portland, Oregon, where he was desperate for money so he got a job working in a metal factory. It was the first legitimate job he'd ever had. He found himself working alongside some Christians who understood God's purpose for their lives. They understood what it meant to be savory salt and illuminating light, so they reached out to Ron and his girlfriend. Their compassion and caring led Ron and his girlfriend to Christ. God turned their lives completely around and Ron became a well-respected man in the community.

Ron had a new life but his old life was still hanging over his head. So he made the decision to go back to Chicago and turn himself in. He was facing some serious charges and it would probably mean 25-30 years in prison. But Ron had learned to practice **Costly Christianity**. He took a train to Chicago and stood before a judge and said, **"I've been reconciled with God through Jesus Christ, but I haven't been reconciled with society. There's a warrant out for my arrest for attempted murder. I'm living a lie and want to come clean. I'm guilty."** Strobel said, **"I'm sitting there covering this as a reporter and I can't believe this guy is doing this. It blew me away. This was not cosmetic Christianity. When somebody takes a costly step like that you know it's prompted by a faith that has truly permeated and transformed their value system and their character. That attracted me"**, Strobel says, **"toward Christianity."**

Let's face it – we live in a wishy-washy world where the national motto might as well be **"Take the easy way out."** Everybody's looking for an easy button. When a Christian is willing to resist the easy way out, and take the higher ground, it gets people's attention. It gets the attention of the skeptics and the atheists. God gives us the gift of purpose. If we are going to fulfill that purpose, we'll have to learn to practice **COSTLY CHRISTIANITY**. We must learn to live out our faith even when it's costly, even when there's a significant price to be paid. Why? Because **when we take our faith that seriously others will take it seriously too.**

So what does that mean to you? You probably don't have an attempted murder warrant out on you somewhere, at least I hope you don't. What will it mean for you to practice **COSTLY CHRISTIANITY**? It might mean telling the truth even when it could cost you your job or your relationship with someone. It might mean doing the right thing even when those around you want you to go along with something unethical. It might mean making a personal sacrifice or a financial sacrifice, just to do the right thing and take the higher ground. That's what it means to be savory salt and illuminating light.

The **SECOND** kind of Christianity that attracts people to God rather than repels them is **COMPASSIONATE CHRISTIANITY**. Strobel talks about the birth of their first child, a little girl named Allison. There they were in the hospital right after her birth; everything seemed to be going fine. The nurses were supposed to bring Allie back to her mom at two o'clock for a feeding and they didn't come and didn't come. Finally a team of doctors showed up, all with long faces. One of them said, **"We've had to transfer your daughter to the neonatal intensive care unit. We think she has spinal meningitis. You need to prepare yourselves for the worst."** He said he and his wife just both burst into tears and sobbed. It was horrific to have a newborn confined to an incubator with tubes stuck in her ankles, with electronic stuff hooked up to her, and monitors surrounding her. But when you don't know God, when you are at the deepest darkest valley of your life and you don't know Jesus Christ—that is the worst possible place to be.

The next few days were a stomach-wrenching blur to them. Day three the phone on the hallway wall of the neonatal intensive care unit rang. "Is Lee Strobel there?" said the voice. It was David, a guy Lee worked with at the Tribune. He was calling to see if he could do anything to help. He heard about Allie and he was praying and in fact had his whole church praying for her. "Can I bring you anything? Do you need anything?" "Is there anything I can do to help?" This was a guy Lee had openly made fun of for being a Christian. Lee had been cruel to him. But that didn't stop David from reaching out with such compassion and tenderness when it was most needed.

Jesus said, ***"Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*** --Matthew 5:16 David was practicing **COMPASSIONATE CHRISTIANITY** and his compassion made such an impact on Lee Strobel. Lee was thinking, "If this is what God is like, then just maybe I do want to believe in him." David was being savory salt and illuminating light.

Strobel's daughter, Allie, recovered fully from her mysterious illness. The doctors never really knew what caused her to spike a 104 degree fever for two weeks. It didn't matter as long as she was ok. Lee and his wife, Leslie, were grateful and Lee never forgot that demonstration of **COMPASSIONATE CHRISTIANITY** from his co-worker.

A **THIRD** kind of Christianity that draws people to Christ is **CONSISTENT CHRISTIANITY**. This was demonstrated to Lee and his wife, by a couple living in the same condominium complex as them by the name of Linda and Jerry. Linda and Jerry had a daughter who was best friends with their daughter. Because of the girls' friendship, they found themselves spending a lot of time with Linda and Jerry. What Linda and Jerry didn't know is that Lee was watching them very closely to see if they were for real. Why? Because he knew Linda and Jerry claimed to be Christians. He was watching for any

In-Your-Face Christianity. He was watching for any Holier-Than-Thou Christianity. He was watching to see if Linda and Jerry were for real or just Cosmetic Christians.

He watched Linda and Jerry for a long time. He found out that while they weren't perfect, they were real and their faith was transparent and authentic. They were honest and sincere. Instead of a smug self-righteousness, he saw a gentle spirit of acceptance. He saw a willingness to admit when they were wrong. He saw a lot more humility than pride. He saw a readiness to forgive and most importantly, he saw in Linda and Jerry a genuine desire to go deeper with Jesus and worship and follow Him more completely.

I don't want to make you paranoid, but if you let others know you're a Christian, they're going to be watching your every move. They're going to have their hypocrisy radar scanning your life day and night. People aren't expecting you to be perfect, because nobody is perfect. But they'll be looking to see if you are the real deal or not. You can show them that you're the real deal by practicing authentic and consistent Christianity

There's one more kind of Christianity Strobel found attractive. It's **COMMITTED CHRISTIANITY**. He saw this in his wife. She became a Christian before him and she wanted more than anything for him to come to know Christ. She started to pray daily for him. In Ezekiel 39:26 it says, *“Moreover I will give you a new heart. I will put a new spirit within you. I will remove your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh.”* She prayed every day for this to happen to her husband. He saw her praying every day and when he asked what she prayed for, she said, “For you to know Christ as I do.” She modeled **COMMITTED CHRISTIANITY** to her husband. She didn't give up. For two years she prayed every day for him specifically, fervently and consistently. And God answered her prayers. He used her to be savory salt and illuminating light.

We all have people in our lives, people we care deeply about who don't know Christ as we do. I invite you to think of someone you can be praying for to come to know Christ. Pray for that one person, for one minute, every day at one o'clock. It's called the 1-1-1 prayer. Pick someone who doesn't know the Lord – someone you want to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Pray every day at one o'clock, for one minute for that one person. Prayer is the very best thing we can do for those who don't know Christ. It could be the greatest gift you ever give someone.

God gives us the gift of purpose—to be savory salt and illuminating light.