**The Greatest Gift**

**Sunday, December 27, 2015**

I hope each of you had a very Merry Christmas (Friday) and that the last few days were filled with joy and blessed times with loved ones.

When I was a child, Christmas was one of the most important days of the year. We didn’t have much money, my dad was a traveling salesman, my mom was a stay-at-home mom who went to school part time, then became a teacher when I was in 8th Grade. We learned to do without. But, my parents would start saving for Christmas at the beginning of the new year and made our Christmas very special. It was very important to then to make sure they spent the exact amount on each child so that no one came up short. If they spent more on everyone else, they would put an envelope in the tree with cash to make up the difference. As I got older, I loved getting a envelope in the tree, yes, money for me (fist pump)

**Part I**

Back when I was in 7th Grade, my twin brother and I got the best gift; it was an electric football game. We were so excited and couldn’t wait to play it. It had two full teams (can’t remember which NFL teams were represented) and two play books. We would set up our players, turn on the vibrating field and cheer for our offense to score or our defense to stop the runner. We loved that game. We played it several days in a row, sometimes for hours. But, like most games, it lost it’s excitement and we didn’t get it out for a few days, then a few weeks, even a few months, until finally we never played it again. But, I still remember that as one of the best gifts I ever got.

Over 2000 years ago, God sent us the greatest gift His people could ever receive, his son, Jesus Christ. Today, we celebrate His birth and at some point, we all have had or will have the opportunity to accept this gift for ourselves. I was 12 years old when I accepted Christ and asked him to be my Lord & Savior; that was an awesome day. (just like Christmas morning) I had been given a life-changing gift. I remember feeling excited and couldn’t wait to share what I received with others. I wanted to spend time with my new gift, everyday – praying to Him, living a new life, doing everything I could to follow His example. Wow, what a great gift!

Then LIFE happened and hanging out with my friends and doing what they were doing became more important, and I set Him aside. There were times when “what I wanted to do” became more important than what he wanted me to do, so I set Him aside. It’s as if I boxed up this precious gift and put it away in the closet.

But then I would get it out again a few days later, especially when I was feeling down or was worried about a family member or felt like I needed a friend. I even got excited about this gift all over again, changed my life for the better, cared about others more than myself, wanted to share this gift with those around me.

And then, the cycle would start all over again, something would happen to cause me to lose focus, like going away to college. I lost interest in my relationship with Christ. “God’s gift” just wasn’t that important anymore.

Sound familiar? Are their times in your life where you lost interest in Christ and chose to leave him out of what you were doing? Were there moments of doubt where you didn’t know if you would ever value that gift again?

The good news is that Jesus is calling out from inside that closet and we can accept His gift again. No matter what we do, he will never give up on us. And, hopefully, by us coming here today to celebrate his birthday, we can show Him that we never gave up either.

**Part II**

My children were 4 & 7 years of age, still living in Brookville, OH. Two days before Christmas, we went to the home of some very dear friends of ours to exchange gifts. They were like grandparents to our children and they invited us over for dinner and gave gifts to the children. My son, Nathan, opened his up first and he got an awesome toy (can’t remember what toy he got). He was overjoyed about this present. Now it was daughter, Danielle’s, turn. After seeing what her brother got, she was super excited to open her gift. When she opened the box her face changed from excitement to puzzled to disappointment. They bought her a school jacket, royal blue & white, had her name and graduating year on it. As her parent, I thought it was pretty cool. However, she wasn’t so thrilled. The fact is that it wasn’t what she expected. It wasn’t what she had hoped for. Unfortunately, she felt the need to express her disappointed. Needless to say, her mom and I were a bit embarrassed.

It just wasn’t what she had expected (reflecting) – At the time that Jesus was born, the Jewish people were hoping that a King, a might warrior, would rise up and lead the people against the Roman Empire. They wanted their land back and needed a leader, a Savior, they could follow.

When Jesus came onto the scene, he just wasn’t what they expected. Sure, they admired his words; thousands would come to hear him speak. They were impressed by His gifts; many watched him perform miracles. But, in the end, he just wasn’t what they felt THEY needed at the time, he wasn’t what they expected. They rejected him, turned against him, and would not acknowledge him as the Son of God. Just as the prophet Isaiah wrote:

“He was despised and rejected by mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.”

This little baby, born just as the prophets had written about hundreds of years earlier, grew up to be a man. A Savior – may have been what God wanted Him to be, but not the way the people wanted him to be. Not what they expected.

In some ways, many of us do the same today. Once we accept this wonderful gift, we first feel great joy; an overwhelming feeling that comes over us. But, over time, haven’t we all rejected him in one way or another? Maybe not entirely, but there are times that through our words, our actions, our interactions with other people, many of us have turned away from Christ, if only for a moment.

There may have been times he just didn’t live up to our expectations, where we expect him do what we want. To heal those we love, perform a miracle to make us happy, fix problems that we’ve created. And when he doesn’t do OUR will, he doesn’t live up to OUR expectations, we may go as far as to question his existence. I hope you have never had moments like that, but it is all too real for many.

**Part III**

In the 90’s, my parents decided they wanted to give my wife and I a nice gift we could use for many years. So, they bought us a large gas grill. The only catch was that I had to put it together. It was huge with hundreds of parts (little exaggeration). And, like some men, I wasn’t very good at reading or following directions. But, here was this multi-page instruction manual and there was no way I was putting this grill together without it. I actually had to read some sections more then once to be sure to get it right. It took me 4 hours, twice I had to take something apart and correct my mistakes. At the end, I had extra parts leftover, which concerned me a bit, but the job was complete and I was quite proud.

When I was finished, I thought to myself – Wouldn’t it have been better for me to have help with this project? Wouldn’t it have been smarter to have a couple helpers to read the instructions and help put it together? Why did I choose to do this alone? Absolutely.

You know . . . the gift of Christ comes with an instruction manual (holding up the Bible). This is our resource; for understanding God, knowing his Son, and identifying His will for our lives.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Spending time in His word, reading the instruction manual, will help us get it right. We may make a few mistakes along the way or misunderstand a passage of scripture, but everything we need to live a life of righteousness, a life with Christ, is right here (holding up the Bible).

And, what about helpers? When I was young, I didn’t always understand what I read, some of the scriptures didn’t make any sense to me. But, I went to Sunday School, I attended youth group, church, and participated in bible studies. I had mentors in my life that helped me understand the scripture and identify how God wanted me to live my life. It would be tough to go it alone, that’s why we have each other.

It wasn’t easy putting that gas grill together, but when I was finished, I felt a great sense of accomplishment. The same way I feel when I study His word and apply it to my life.

**Closing Remarks**

How do we know that Jesus is the greatest gift we could ever receive? For me, it all comes down to what he did (move to Cross slide) on the cross. God loves US! He loves us SO much that he sent His son. And it happened exactly the way the prophets had written. And because of God’s love for us, He allowed His Son to suffer and die on a cross so that we can be forgiven of our sins and have eternal life. There is no greater love than giving your life for someone and God proved that through His Son.

So, no matter how often we reject this gift, no matter how many times we seek Him ONLY when it meets OUR needs, no matter how many times we treat Him like he hadn’t met OUR expectations, or no matter how often we fail to read His instruction manual and seek His will for us, HE STILL LOVES US, Unconditionally.

Today, let us celebrate his birth. Tomorrow, let’s go out and share this gift with others. The greatest gift we could ever receive – Jesus Christ. Amen.