

Evolution of a Wish List

Matthew 25:31-43

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

I have a friend who commented on November 1, the day after Halloween, that it was officially the Christmas season. Now, Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, so I'm kind of strict about enforcing the fact that November is NOT part of Christmas – either in the church, or in culture. And that used to be true. But let's face it, in our culture, it's actually the Christmas season even before Halloween.

I try to separate my holidays, and really enjoy Thanksgiving before moving on to Advent. But even I have already started planning family activities, and thinking about holiday gifts. Actually, it seems like in the last week, my email has been exploding with messages either giving or asking for gift ideas. And since my family includes people literally from age 2 to 92, I've noticed that there is a pretty clear evolution of the wish list.

The youngest in my family is Kenna. And she's pretty clear about what she wants – and when she wants it. Which is now. She doesn't do wish lists yet, because she can't really think too much past what she wants now, in the moment. But once kids get the hang of letting you know what they want, they do seem to become experts.

My nephew's list from last year has become family legend. He was doing a pretty good job, writing down ideas that my sister could share with each of us. Because to be honest, I don't

know that much about what a 5-year-old boy really wants to play with. After he had crafted a pretty long list, he turned it over to my sister. She realized that his list was pretty vague – it included things like video games, stuffed animals, Pokémon cards. My sister encouraged him to list which video games he wanted. And boy did my nephew go to town. The new list read: video games – all; stuffed animals – all; Pokémon cards – not Pikachu.

His list made us all laugh, but it was entirely appropriate for a 5-year-old. It's troubling, however, when someone older and more mature still writes out a wish list for everything in the world. At some point, kids realize they aren't going to get everything in the world. They aren't even going to get everything they ask for. So they better make sure their list only has the items they really want. They learn to make choices and prioritize. They learn to self-limit and set reasonable expectations.

But you know your wish list has evolved into an adult list when you ask for a vacuum cleaner or a circular saw. For some people, that's the end of the evolution. When you start asking for tools that help you to do your chores. When you ask for what you need, rather than what you want. But there really is one last evolution. Asking not for what you need, but for what others need even more.

Amy Grant had a Christmas hit with her remake of the song *Grown Up Christmas List*. The song describes an adult meeting Santa face-to-face, but instead of asking for material things, she asks for intangible gifts to bless all people. It goes like this:

So here's my lifelong wish
My grown-up Christmas list
(Not for myself
But for a world in need):

No more lives torn apart

That wars would never start
And time would heal all hearts
Everyone would have a friend
And right would always win
And love would never end
This is my grown-up Christmas list

Well, those are all good things; no one can argue with that. It's an idealistic vision, filled with hope of what the world could be. And that's one of the reasons we all love the Christmas season. Not just Christians, but everyone. Because there are lots of people who celebrate and embrace Christmas even though they don't really believe in Jesus. They celebrate because they want to believe in hope, the hope that things can be better.

As Christians, we have this hope because we know who can make things better. God, the one who created the world, can recreate the world. And at Christmas, we celebrate that Jesus, the Messiah, the son of God – in fact, God himself in human form – came to live among us. The one who can fix everything and make the world perfect actually showed up! So why isn't everything all better?

Because Jesus isn't willing to do it on his own. He wants us to help out. Kind of like when Kenna throws her food on the floor. Of course I'm going to pick it up, I'll even do most of the actual work, but I want her to help. She has to learn that it was wrong to throw the food, that breaking rules has consequences, that she is responsible for her actions, and that messes need to be cleaned up. So I can understand why Jesus didn't just wave a magic wand and fix the world. If he had, there would be countless people who didn't learn their lessons, who would have immediately messed things up again.

And so here we are, with an imperfect world. And just as much as we want it to be fixed, so does Jesus. But even more than that, Jesus wants us to be part of the healing. That's why the final evolution of the wish list makes your list look an awful lot like Jesus' list. So what is it, exactly, that Jesus wants? Well, you may spend a lot of time and brain matter deciding on the perfect gift to get your partner, or your best friend, but Jesus is pretty easy to figure out.

Look at our Scripture reading. Jesus commends and rewards those who have fed him, given him something to drink, welcomed him, clothed him, cared for him, and visited him. Likewise, he reprimands those who haven't taken care of him. So if you want to give Jesus something from his wish list, feed him. Give him something to drink. Welcome him. Clothe him. Care for him. Visit him.

Of course, Jesus isn't exactly around anymore. I mean, you can still pray to him, but it's kind of hard to clothe him. So Jesus tells us, "it doesn't have to be me. Do it for the least of these. They are my family, and what you do for them you do for me." There's a principle in math called the substitutionary principle. If $A=B$, and $B=C+D$, then it's also true that $A=C+D$. Jesus is saying that for the purposes of his wish list, he is equal to the least of these. And the least of these are those in the world who need our help. They are Jetly. They are Muteti, the child sponsored by the youth group. They are people bought and sold in modern day slavery. They are people in Waunakee barely getting by. They are everyone who needs help to have food, water, clothes, hospitality, friendship, love. Jesus made the meaning of discipleship perfectly clear: you can't separate your relationship with God from your responsibility for God's people.

Now, I hope that nothing I've said so far is really earth-shattering. It seems like every year we talk about how we can focus more on Jesus, and less on the materialism that has overtaken Christmas. And I think we can probably agree that yes, this is what's on Jesus' wish list. And yes, we should be giving gifts to him for his birthday. It all makes sense as long as we're sitting here together, until we walk out and face the realities of how most of the people we know will celebrate. And then we start in with the excuses for why we can't give more to Jesus.

- But we are living in the greatest recession since the Great Depression!
- But the kids are expecting to get gifts. And
- But giving gifts is how I've always celebrated Christmas.
- But everyone in my family will think I'm crazy – or a scrooge!

- But Jesus wants us to take care of our families first, right?
- But... but... but

Well, those excuses make our ‘buts’ look big, but they’re really not that significant.

These are all things that we choose to let get in the way of finding room for Jesus and for what he wants on his birthday wish list.

Because Jesus doesn’t ask us for leftovers. Nowhere in the Bible when God talks about giving does he ask us to first take care of ourselves and our families, and then if we have a little left over, to spread it around. No. God says start by giving faithfully. Return a portion to the Lord, and learn to trust that you can live on the rest. God doesn’t ask for leftovers, given begrudgingly or with guilt. No, God wants us to give joyfully. To give because we know it helps us and our spirituality as much as it helps those who receive. God doesn’t ask for leftovers, those slightly less-desirable bits that have been sitting at the back of the fridge for a week. God instead asks us to give sacrificially – giving up something that we could use. That we maybe had plans for, but which we honestly can live without.

Living on less when we could have more, and giving away more when it means having less is scary for a lot of people. But our willingness to trust God and give fewer Christmas gifts to our friends and family so we can give more to the least of these can literally mean life or death of hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

I’m not saying you can’t buy gifts or celebrate Christmas. Far from it. But I am inviting you, challenging you to keep track of your spending. Of all you spend this Christmas season, what percent is for you and your family? What percent do you give to Jesus as the least of these? After all, it’s not your birthday. Amen and amen.