

## WHAT IS THE MOST WONDERFUL THING THAT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU?

If I could preach a sermon that nobody would misunderstand – a sermon that would speak the real Message of the Christian Faith with such clarity and truth that every person here would truly hear it, not just in the mind but also in the heart – oh my, how I would love that! But I rather doubt that this is the first thing that came into your mind when asked, “What is the most wonderful thing that could happen to you?”

In any case, I want to muse for a few moments on some of the things that most humans would put pretty close to the top of any list about “the most wonderful things that could happen to us.” Before I do, I want to make it clear that I am not coming at any of this with mockery or derision. It’s easy to slip over that line when we contemplate things we really want. The best within us is often our biggest problem. Most of us have become aware that Satan tempts us the most with our best motives. It is the “genius” of evil to betray us by appealing to our best motives. The temptations Jesus faced in His forty-day vigil in the wilderness are classic illustrations: feed the hungry; take political and military might to bring justice and peace to the world; use spiritual miracles to heal and win people to the Kingdom.

Some people who miss it in the New Testament catch on from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy or one of the many fantasy epics that were inspired by him. The Ring of Power makes it *seem* like we could do so much good if we would only use its power for good purposes. But the Ring only serves Sauron, the Evil Lord. All who use it are betrayed into his purposes.

So we have learned to be cautious. But that is no reason to mock or despise the good intentions that really are part of the “image of God” that our Creator has built within us. How sad that our impulses to be kind, loving, and helpful are surrounded with realities that make it complicated. In our passage today, the man wants to get up and give his neighbor the three loaves of bread. But if he does, it will take him an hour or more to get his family bedded down for the night again. If the neighbor bangs on the door loud enough and for long enough, everybody will be awake anyway, so it will no longer make any difference. Might as well do the good deed, if the price has already been paid.

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What are some of the things we know to be on almost everybody's list of great blessings? Good health. Good relationships. A good reputation. A satisfying job. We could say many things about the motives and the potential abuses of each of these desires. But what is wrong with wanting to be healthy? Is it not easier to get through the day and to accomplish many things if we are healthy? Is it not easier to be patient and loving toward others if we are feeling good ourselves?

Who prefers harsh relationships full of criticism, judgment, suspicion, and mistrust ... to relationships full of appreciation, support, affection, and approval? Yet who among us has not experienced both kinds? We even learn that pretense does not help. With relationships, faking it does not make it. Pretended support and approval often ends up worse than knowing things are amiss between us and others.

In any case, health and wealth are on almost everybody's list of things that it would be wonderful to receive. I think it was William Sloane Coffin, Jr. who said: "If you want to avoid God, your neighbor, and your own inner self, concentrate on health, wealth, and status, and cultivate your garden of grievances." Somebody is always trying to ruin everything. On the other hand, we know it is true: If we get too self-centered – if we start seeing life only in terms of our own self-interest – it ruins even the best of blessings. A life with no room for God and no room for serving God's Kingdom more than our own can turn any blessing into a curse.

One of the desires, hopes, motives I think is common to us all is the desire to be truly useful, truly helpful to others. It may be a cut-down version that still calls to us, but I think that on some level, every one of us would greatly desire to make a significant contribution to others. Write a great symphony; discover a cure; explore some area of life that contributes understanding or benefit to many others. Of course, such things have a tendency to make one famous. Do we desire the fame, or the contribution? Or both? My mother used to say, "There is no limit to the amount of good you can do, if you don't care who gets the credit." (I had a difficult mother.) In a song out of my childhood, Jimmy Durante used to sing: "Fame, if you win it, comes and goes in a minute."

So what about wealth? I rarely meet anybody who does not wish they had more money than they do. Does that mean that the vast majority of us suffer from one of the Seven Deadly Sins: the one named greed? Maybe, but I do not think so. I know a few people who I think

are greedy, but only a few. Even spending a lot of time and energy trying to get more wealth does not mean to me that a person is greedy. What's the motive? They say that God looks on the heart; too bad we cannot. But why would so many of us wish we had more money?

Every one of the Seven Deadly Sins names something that is necessary to our survival. That is, until it is exaggerated out of normal proportions and becomes a compulsion or obsession, each of the Seven Deadly Sins is a very healthy and appropriate part of life. Is it lust if I want to make love to my wife, or she to me? Do we really believe that God does not want us to have children? Or to have desire and affection for one another? Of course, the abuses and misuses are all around us too. But that does not mean that sexuality itself is a sin. Huge portions of the Christian church have never been clear about this. Huge portions of the Christian church still imply or state outright that if you don't "do it," you are holier than if you do. You do not have to explain to me that making love to people outside of long-term, committed, love-bond relationships brings more sorrow and pain to people than it does blessings. That's not theory or imagination to me. That is fifty-five years of being a Pastor. Even so, how ridiculous is it to honor virginity or celibacy above normal marriage relationships? Martin Luther figured it out; why can't the rest of the Christian church figure it out?

It was a Rabbi who told me: "Admiring what somebody else has does not make us envious – it makes us discerning. Only, instead of wanting what *they* have, we should go get our own." Envy, for those of you who do not know, is one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

It is not greed to want to support your family or to be generous toward your friends. It is not greed to wish we could give more to purposes or people we believe in. When I was in Omaha, just before coming here, it came out that Warren Buffet had a problem. There was a thirty-three-billion-dollar excess in his finances for that year, and he was wondering what to do with it. Everybody who heard this news had an instant suggestion for how poor Warren could solve his problem. Of course, we were not really pondering *his* problem. We would have been happy to take some of this excess for our own purposes and desires. But Warren was wondering how to invest this money so it would go on being productive. That is a very different world, and one I barely understand. Is Warren himself greedy? In all likelihood, far less so than I am. Does he have any personal desires for more money for himself? I very greatly doubt it.

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Most of us know, or at least we have heard, that Warren Buffet gives huge amounts of money to the Gates Foundation. He trusts the Gates Foundation to be careful and responsible with how it tries to help others with financial resources. But if Warren gave a few billion to me or any other individual, how would that money be productive? I might think it would be wonderful fun for me, but what would be the chances that I would use it in ways that match the principles of good stewardship?

Beyond the toys and trinkets we might think would be wonderful and delightful, why would most of us like to be more wealthy than we are? I think it is because we dream of being helpful to others. If that is correct, then at the heart of what we often call greed is a powerful desire to be helpful to others. *Generosity* is what drives our greed – and if it gets out of hand, starts to do great evil. Wanting to be more loving toward others is what causes us to dream of having more wealth.

If that is true, then it is not evil but *goodness* that stokes the fires of all our worst blunders. And it is Satan trying to use our best motives against us. That is at the heart of all our worst temptations. So what do we learn, if we are on the Christian Path? Stay humble. Do not try to be the Savior. Keep following the true Savior. Never think we can help people or solve any problems without the Spirit's guidance and direction. That is the kind of thing that is terribly hard for us humans to remember and truly believe. Just give us the Ring – we will use it for good. We promise.

What *will* help most of us, most of the time? More money, or more alignment with the Holy Spirit in honest prayer? What will truly transform the lives of the people we love? More money, or a clearer relationship with the living God? It's easy to give "Sunday School answers" to serious questions, but what do we *really* believe and trust? It's easy to put lights on trees and sing carols for a few weeks each year, but do we trust and honor the coming of God's true Messiah?

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Jesus starts a conversation with us by telling us this simple story of a neighbor who needs a favor. But as Jesus often does, He keeps jumping to deeper and deeper levels. Do we, imperfect as we are, want to give painful or dangerous gifts to each other?

One of the best things about Christmas is that, within certain limitations of course, we all get an excuse for giving gifts to each other.

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It is one of our deepest instincts and desires. And for a change, we all get to give whatever we can. How many stories we tell and how easily we are moved by stories about giving. “What can I give him, poor as I am?” On top of legends about the three wise men (not biblical in the first place), we now have more and more “other” wise men creeping into the story. Any excuse for shedding a few more tears over how much we long to be givers of gifts. By the way, the biblical story is not about three wise men; it is about three gifts: the ones appropriate for bringing to our King.

My favorite movie at Christmastime is called *A Christmas Carol*. And it has to be the one with George C. Scott playing Ebenezer Scrooge. There is almost nothing “Christian” in the entire movie. Some people are singing carols; that’s as close as it comes. But I love the movie anyway. Jesus is nowhere to be found. Nobody is meeting Jesus or doing anything differently because they are converted. Ebenezer has been a miser and has hoarded his money all his life. Now he has enough money to buy Christmas. He reconciles with his nephew and secretly provides a huge chicken for the Cratchits’ Christmas dinner. On Monday he will double Bob Cratchit’s salary, and he gives a huge contribution to the poor. He will pay medical bills for Tiny Tim and become like a grandfather to him.

The great American dream: have a lot of money and spread it around to do good, then God and everybody will love us. Jesus died on the Cross so we could have a lot of money and spread it around to do good. Why does that seem so empty and false to me? What am I missing? Why am I so out of step with the culture I was raised in?

Ebenezer has been frightened by his own mortality and by realizing that because of the way he has lived, nobody cares about him. There is no hint that he has encountered God’s Messiah or that he wants to do the will of God out of gratitude or love for God.

As I say, I love the movie and watch it every Christmastime. The American side of me enjoys it thoroughly, and I like the fantasy that if I was as wealthy as Ebenezer Scrooge, I would be as generous as he was. But the *Christian* side of me misses the Savior who is central to the true Christmas. What about being born anew and turning my will and my life over to my Lord, no matter what my circumstances are and no matter what I have or do not have?

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So then we hear Jesus asking us if we think very deeply about the gifts we want to bring to each other. Would we knowingly bring gifts that are painful or damaging? Especially if we are bringing gifts to a son, a loved one, a relative we really care about, a friend we cherish. Would we give a scorpion instead of an egg, or a snake instead of a fish?

Then down another level: What kind of gifts do we really want from *God*? What is our real expectation from a true Christmas? What sort of gifts do we really want or desire from our God?

Then we find out what Jesus thinks is the most precious gift of all. Whatever *we* may think, Jesus thinks the highest and best and most precious gift that even Almighty God can give us is the Holy Spirit.

Sorry to interrupt myself, but a few of you have reminded me that you have Pentecostal friends telling you that if you do not speak in tongues, you are not yet a true Christian. And these same friends are trying to tell you that the gift of the Holy Spirit is about speaking in tongues – and about nothing else. You either speak in tongues or you have not yet received the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting that there is no claim or comment anywhere in the New Testament that Jesus ever spoke in tongues. There is no teaching or parable or story anywhere in the New Testament to tell us that Jesus ever tried to teach His *disciples* to speak in tongues. Yet Jesus did receive the Holy Spirit at His own baptism. Furthermore, the story of the first Christian Pentecost is not about speaking in tongues. The flame of fire rested on each believer there, but they were not speaking in tongues. They were each *hearing the Message* – and the connection with the Holy Spirit – in their own native language. That is, it needed no translation. It rang true and clear at the very core of each person there. That is not about speaking in tongues; that is about the New Covenant: “*I shall set my law within them, writing it on their hearts.*” (Jeremiah 31:33)

Anyway, we all know that fortunes may be gained or lost. Health may come or go. Success or fame is but the opinion of the moment, based on human perspectives, not on God’s eternal truth. But there is a gift that links us to the God who is real in every realm we will ever know. There is a gift that will comfort, forgive, inspire, empower, and direct us, no matter what our outer circumstances may be.

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We get tangled up a little in our questions about the Holy Spirit. We get tangled up even more because we have turned poetic gratitude for the Trinity into a “doctrine” that locks everything down and explains it once and for all. But the Holy Spirit comes from another realm and connects us to another realm, even while we are still in this one. Trying to lock down the mysteries and wonders of God is always one of the best ways in the world to miss them entirely.

Jesus received this great gift from the Father at His baptism. From then on, this was what Jesus wanted above all other things for His followers. I believe that the Holy Spirit *is* the Resurrected Jesus. But I am not trying to define or describe a new creed. It is what Jesus promises will come to His followers after His death and resurrection. He instructs them to wait in Jerusalem until they have received this gift. There is so much for them to do: spread the Gospel – the invitation to a New WAY of Life – to the whole world. But it will be disaster if they try to do this by their own wisdom or generosity or good intentions. They must wait to be empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Wait and watch! Do not go anywhere without it – all the awareness that bothers and annoys us humans the most, while we are still in charge and running our own lives.

What is the greatest gift of all? What is the true gift of Christmas? It is the only gift that can put us in tune with the Kingdom of God.

*“How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* But are we asking? Is it even on our list of things we want for Christmas?