

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 10, 1989, by the Rev, W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 2:11

“Then they opened their treasures and presented Him
with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.”

THE WISE MEN’S GIFTS -- AND OURS

Who were these Wise Men who came to pay their homage and to present their gifts to the newborn Savior? We really do not know. Out of the mysterious East they came, following the star; and into that same East they quickly disappeared again. Some say that they were three kings who came to swear fealty to the King of the Jews; and there is an interesting legend of how in their old age they were converted to Christianity by the Apostle Thomas. The legend tells us that they went as missionaries to savage tribes, that they were put to death by them, and that long afterwards a Frankish king took their bones home with him and buried them in his cathedral at Cologne. But all we really know is that they were Wise Men, and that they came out of the East to see the infant Jesus and to offer Him their gifts.

From very early times Christians have seen a peculiar fitness in the gifts the Wise Men brought. They have seen in each gift something which specially matched some characteristic of Jesus and His work.

1. Gold is the gift for a King.

Seneca tells us that in Parthia it was the custom that no one could ever approach the king without a gift. And gold, the king of metals, is the appropriate gift for the King of Kings.

We do well to remember that Jesus Christ is King. We can never meet Jesus on the level of equality. We must always meet Him on terms of complete submission and complete surrender.

Lord Nelson, the renowned British admiral, always treated his vanquished foes with unusual courtesy. After one of his naval victories, the defeated admiral was brought aboard Nelson’s flagship, and on to the quarterdeck. Knowing Nelson’s reputation for chivalry, and thinking to trade upon it, he advanced across the deck with hand outstretched, as if he were advancing to shake hands with an equal. Nelson’s hand remained by his side. “Your sword first,” he said, “and then your hand.” Before we can be friends with Christ, we must submit to Him, and obey Him.

2. Frankincense is the gift for a Priest.

It was in the Temple worship and at the Temple sacrifices that the sweet perfume of frankincense was used. The function of a priest is to open the way to God for men. The Latin word for priest is “pontifex” which means a “bridge builder.” The priest is the man who builds a

bridge between us and God. And that is precisely what Jesus did. He opened up the way into the very presence of God; and since Jesus died and rose again, no human priest is ever again needed; for, through Jesus, the bridge to God has been built forever, and each of us, sinful though we be, have direct access, through the Savior, to the very throne of God.

3. Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die.

Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came into the world to die.

Holman Hunt has a famous picture of Jesus. It shows our Lord at the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. It is the close of day, and the last rays of the setting sun are streaming in through the open door. The young Carpenter Who has been toiling at the bench, raises Himself for a moment from His cramped, stooping position, and stretches out His arms. Just then the sun catches His figure and casts His shadow on the wall behind Him, and its form is the form of a cross. Hunt entitled the painting "The Shadow of Death," and it is the artist's striking way of reminding us that right from the beginning of our Lord's ministry death was in the air. Jesus came into the world to live for people, and in the end to die for people.

Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for One Who was to die; these were the gifts of the Wise Men; and even at the cradle of Christ they foretold that He was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the supreme and only Savior of His people.

We remember with adoring gratitude that Jesus our Lord, by His death and resurrection, has saved us from the penalty and the power of sin. And because of our union with Him through faith, we know that one day, when this life is ended, He will take us to be with Himself in heaven forever. For this very reason, we should be, of all people, most anxious to do precisely what the Wise Men did - open our treasures, and present to Christ our choicest gifts.

When you think of it, it is almost incredible that we should be able to bring a gift of any kind to Jesus. But amazingly enough, there is a very real sense in which our Lord is just as helpless without us as we are without Him. He is no longer in this world in the body, and therefore, if He wants something done, He has to get a human being to do it for Him. That is at least part of what Paul meant when he said that the Church is "the Body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

He has no hands but our hands to do His work today;
He has no feet but our feet to lead men in His way;
He has no voice but our voice to tell men how He died;
He has no help but our help to lead them to His side.

In 1990, upon which we are so soon to enter, what are the treasures which you possess, and which you can offer to Christ?

1. You have a VOICE, and Christ wants it.

Sir Wilfred Grenfell of Labrador, that manliest of modern Christian missionaries, in his autobiography, tells how he first came to make his witness for Christ. As a young fellow he

strayed, one evening, quite by accident, into a meeting where testimonies were being asked for; I think it was a Salvation Army meeting. For a time, no one got up to speak of what Christ meant to him. And then a sailor, in uniform, rose, and affirmed his faith in Jesus Christ, and told how Christ had sustained him amid the peculiar dangers and temptations of his life. Grenfell looked at the man; he wondered what ship he sailed in; he speculated as to how his shipmates would make a sorry fool of him that night. But the man spoke with quiet conviction, and suddenly young Grenfell saw the glory of a life dedicated to Jesus Christ! He looked 'round the hall, and there was not another soul on his feet; and then, as Grenfell put it, "He looked so lonely that I got up and stood beside him!" He never saw that sailor again; he never even found out his name; but that unknown disciple was the means of enabling one of the greatest of our modern missionary heroes to embrace Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord and Savior.

Ian Maclaren used to plead with every man who would be a preacher to "speak a good word for Jesus Christ." Not only preachers, but all Christians should be eager at all times to do just that. If the early disciples had not been untiring in their efforts to communicate the Gospel, there would be no Christian Church today.

During 1990 try to speak a good word for Jesus Christ every day. You are not, of course, to ram your convictions down peoples' throats at every conceivable opportunity. But remember, it is just as reprehensible, and indeed more disloyal to Christ, never to speak to others about Him at all.

We all have enough intelligence and discretion to commend those causes which we admire and support. Often, we are quite uninhibited in our enthusiasm. And at the same time, we fail miserably to communicate our faith, or even to let it be known by so much as a passing remark, that Christ is the source of any goodness, any stability, any peace of mind that we possess.

A Christian business man in Seattle confessed how he had unwittingly discouraged a business associate from coming to Christ for years. One day his friend told the Christian business man that he had become a Christian the night before at a Billy Graham crusade meeting. The long-time Christian was overjoyed, and said so, but the new Christian replied, "Friend, you're the reason I have resisted becoming a Christian for all these years. I figured that if a person could live a good life as you do, and not be a Christian, there was no need to become one!"

Mind you, if you are to witness effectively for Christ, it will require more prayer, more study, more training perhaps, more self-discipline on your part, so that you may grow in faith and in your knowledge of God.

Let us resolve that during 1990 we will study God's Word, and pray as we have never done before, and equip ourselves in mind and spirit, so that as opportunity arises we may offer our voice to Christ and speak with authority and conviction about Him Who is our Savior and dearest Friend.

And if any of you are a trifle ashamed to witness to your faith, and think it is vulgar and inappropriate to challenge your friends with the claims of Christ, then you had better remember those awesome words of our Lord when He said, "If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in

this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes to His Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38).

2. **You have a LIFE**, and Christ wants that life. And it is the total life that He wants, not just a part of it, but the whole of it. He doesn't want someone who is one thing in church on Sunday, and something quite different during the rest of the week.

As a recent writer has pointed out, "The ancient Jewish people had no word in their Hebrew language to correspond to the word "religion" as it is commonly used today. The whole of life as they saw it came from God and was subject to His law. There could be no separate part of it labelled "religion."

What would this mean if we applied it to our everyday lives? It would mean that every single thing we did, at home, at work, in the office, the shop, the factory, the classroom, was done for God -- done in such a way that we could take it and show it to God and say, "Lord, this I do as an offering to You." Life would be regarded as a sacred trust: our talents and spiritual gifts bestowed upon us, so that we might hand them back to God as our gift to Him for the promotion of His glory.

About the time the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, George Herbert wrote a famous hymn, two stanzas of which I will quote:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see;
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine!

That fine Christian, Dr. Edward Wilson, who perished with Captain Scott on their journey back from the South Pole in 1912, would never allow anyone to relieve him of a menial duty unless he himself could use the time thus saved to do something worthwhile in improving himself or in helping someone else. Dr. Wilson counted every moment a precious gift from God, to be used for God's glory. Do we?

George Eliot, in one of her poems, draws a picture of Antonio Stradivari, the maker of the most valuable and exquisite violins in existence. He did not play them; he only made them; and these are the words George Eliot puts into the mouth of old Antonio:

When any master holds 'twixt hand and chin
A violin of mine, he will be glad
Antonio lived, made violins, and made
Them best of all. God gives them music;

I give them violins to play upon.
If my hand slacked, I should rob God, leaving
A Blank instead of violins. 'Tis God gives skill,
But not without men's hands: He could not make
Antonio Stradivari's violins
Without Antonio!

I might add that what is considered to be his finest violin, the famous Alard, was crafted in 1715 when Antonio was 71 years old!

But listen to that line --

“If my hand slacked, I should rob God.”

That was what Jesus believed when He said, “We must carry on the work of Him Who sent Me while the daylight lasts. Night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4).

That was what Dr. Edward Wilson believed.

And if each one of us leaves the service this morning with those words ringing in our ears, what treasures we could offer to our Lord as we live our life each passing day!

AMEN.