

Author: **Rev. Ted Gray**
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Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

Congregation: **First United Reformed Church**
Oak Lawn, Illinois
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O Come, All Ye Faithful

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

Title: **A Gift Refused**
Text: [Matthew 2:1-12; Mark 15:21-23 \(View\)](#)
Occasion: [Advent](#)
Topic: [The Incarnation](#)

We Three Kings of Orient Are

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

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Pastor Ted Gray
 12/25/2019

“A Gift Refused” Matthew 2:1-11; Mark 15:21-24

Christmas gifts are given by Christians as a reflection of God’s gift to us. God’s gift to us, of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, is the greatest gift ever given. It is so great that the extent and magnificence of it are indescribable. In 2 Corinthians 9, after discussing our giving to the Lord, the apostle exclaims, *“Thanks be to God for his indescribable–inexpressible – gift!”* (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Consequently, all our gifts pale in comparison. Our gifts, unfortunately, so often reflect the consumer values of our culture. Even so, most of us enjoy receiving a gift. Many of you, especially you children, are eagerly waiting to open the gifts under the tree.

But can you imagine refusing a gift? We know that gifts are often re-gifted, and that many are exchanged. Sometimes children are disappointed by their gifts, especially new clothes for young boys! The line for returns will be long, not only the day after Christmas but for a week or more to come. But can you imagine refusing a gift altogether? That’s not done very often. Yet, in our passage from

Mark 15, we see that Jesus refused one of his first Christmas presents. It was the gift of myrrh, which admittedly, was the most unusual gift presented to Jesus by the wise men.

It was understandable that the wise men brought gold. Gold is the gift for kings, and it points to the eternal kingship of Jesus over all kings. It was also understandable that they brought incense. Incense represents the high-priestly work of Jesus, that not only did he offer himself as the only suitable sacrifice for sin, but he also ever lives to intercede on the behalf of those who believe in him.

But myrrh, although used as a gift at times, was a common substance in biblical days. Myrrh is dried sap from trees that grow in the desert. The sap is harvested by beating and cutting the tree so that as the bark is ripped open the sap flows out. The sap is then collected, processed, and used for a variety of purposes.

We first read about myrrh in Genesis 37:25 which describes Joseph's brothers' plot to kill him. They had stripped him of his robe of many colors, thrown him into a cistern and were discussing how to kill him, when a caravan of Ishmaelites came along. They were coming from Gilead, and Genesis 37:25 says: *"Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt."*

Myrrh was a popular commodity, a popular product in Biblical times. It was so popular that the New Testament city of Smyrna, written about in Revelation 2, was a center of myrrh production and churned out tons of myrrh each year. Revelation 18:13 describes how when Babylon the Great falls, merchants will mourn that no one buys their cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones – and yes, myrrh is listed among those valuable commodities that will be no longer be bought and sold after the fall of civilization.

A Variety of Uses

What made myrrh so popular back in biblical times? It was a truly versatile product and was used in a wide variety of ways. For instance, if you wanted to present someone with a gift, myrrh would be a good part of an overall package. Myrrh was relatively cheap, so you would give it with other gifts, but even as a small part of a larger package, myrrh was usually appreciated as a gift.

As an example, we read in Genesis 43 of the predicament that Jacob faced when he realized he would have to send his youngest son, Benjamin, to Egypt with the older brothers to get grain. Jacob and his sons knew that the ruler in Egypt was a stern man. But Jacob's sons didn't know yet, at that point, that the ruler was the one whom they had sold into slavery years ago, their own brother, Joseph.

Jacob was talking to his sons about how to get on this ruler's good side, and so he said in Genesis 43:11, *"Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take some down to the man as a gift - a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds."* Myrrh all by itself wouldn't be much of a gift, but combined with other gifts it was a great stocking stuffer.

Part of what made myrrh appreciated so much is that it was versatile enough to be used for many purposes, even for beauty treatments. Esther 2:12 describes how *"before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes (Ahasuerus), she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and*

cosmetics.” Still today myrrh is used for cosmetics. Amazon sells a 1 ounce bottle of myrrh oil for \$49.95. Or, if your Christmas budget is stretched, you can buy the solid myrrh – the dried tree sap – for \$11.95 per pound.

Another reason myrrh was so popular in Biblical times was because of its fragrance; it was used as a perfume. An old hymn describes it this way: *“My Lord has garments so wondrous fine, and myrrh their texture fill; its fragrance reached this heart of mine, with joy, my being thrills. Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe, only His great eternal love made my Savior go.”* (Harry Barraclough, 1915)

The hymn is based on Psalm 45, which is clearly messianic. Verse 6-7 of the Psalm declare:

*Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;
you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;*

Then verse 8:

*Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.
From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;*

Those verses are a clear reference to Christ. The author of Hebrews, in Hebrews 1:8-9, quotes from Psalm 45, as the Holy Spirit extolls the deity and greatness of Jesus Christ.

A fourth use for myrrh was that of a pain killer, as we read in Mark 15:23: *“Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.”* In biblical times, if you were hurting, your back ached or your head was splitting, you didn’t reach for Tylenol or aspirin. You reached for myrrh, and you mixed it in some wine. The myrrh and wine together deadened the pain and gave some relief. Do you see why myrrh, with its wide variety of uses, was so popular? No wonder it was well received as a gift, even though it was not very expensive.

A fifth use of myrrh, and perhaps the use that made a city like Smyrna wealthy by churning out tons of myrrh, is that myrrh was used for burials. Death has a stench. If you have ever had a mouse, or some other rodent, die in between the walls of your house, you know what the stench of death is like. It is not something you want to experience again.

Consequently, in biblical times when people died, to overcome that stench of death, they were wrapped in linens filled with myrrh and aloes. And if they were embalmed, as the Egyptians were famous for doing, then the embalming agent of choice was myrrh. In John 19 we are told how when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came to bury Jesus, they had with them 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes. *“Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.”* (John 19:40)

Do you see how wise the Magi were to present Jesus not only with gold to show his true deity and kingship? And incense to show his high priesthood? And then myrrh, to represent his suffering and his death as our truly human, yet truly divine Savior and Lord?

A Gift Refused

Why then did Jesus refuse the gift of myrrh, the same gift brought to him and his parents by the Magi? We read of his refusal in Mark 15:23, as he was being crucified: *“Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.”*

Jesus must have been extremely thirsty. He had gone through the most excruciating trial you could ever imagine. It was the trial where they clothed him in a purple robe, placed a crown of thorns on his head, spit on him, and struck him repeatedly with a staff. They saluted him sarcastically, *“Hail! King of the Jews!”* and mockingly knelt before him. Then they led him out to crucify him. (Reference Mark 15:16-20).

Have you noticed that when you are tense, when you are under a lot of pressure, your throat becomes parched and dry? Jesus is like us in every way except sin. He knew thirst. He was incredibly thirsty. But he was given nothing to drink during the trial, and then he was forced to carry the cross toward Calvary. But Jesus was so weak and parched that Simon of Cyrene was enlisted to carry the cross instead.

Can you imagine – even begin to imagine – how thirsty Jesus was? No wonder he was exhausted carrying the cross! No wonder Simon of Cyrene had to take over. And then, having arrived at Mount Calvary, he was stripped and nailed to the cross. Jesus was parched, incredibly thirsty when suddenly, surprisingly, the soldiers actually extended kindness to him. They offered him a mixture of wine and myrrh to ease his thirst and deaden the pain. And Jesus refused! Why?

Jesus refused the wine mixed with myrrh in order to experience the full and complete penalty for your sin and mine. As he bore your sin and mine he took the full fury and proper, righteous wrath of God the Father on himself. He bore the curse we deserve. And he wasn't about to deaden the pain.

Later on, Jesus did take wine that was offered to Him. Mark mentions it briefly in Mark 15:36 but John describes it more fully in John 19:28-30 where he writes: *“Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”*

The wine that Jesus drank had no myrrh, no pain killer. By drinking that wine, he fulfilled Psalm 69:19-21, which describes the thoughts and the prayer of Jesus on the cross: *“You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you. Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.”*

Do you see the wisdom in the gift of myrrh? Do you see the wisdom God graciously gave to the magi? Their common gift of myrrh pointed far beyond the cradle. It pointed far beyond the manger. Their gift pointed to a life of suffering, sorrow and pain, and it pointed to death on the cross and a corpse – though it would not see decay – in the tomb.

It was a gift refused when mixed with wine to deaden the pain which Jesus had to experience as he suffered and died for our salvation. But it was a gift that so accurately portrayed his life as the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with suffering, who would die and be wrapped in linens and 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes before victoriously rising from the grave.

A Gift Given and Accepted by God's Grace

Which leads us to another application: To know the true meaning of Christmas you and I must always look beyond the manger to the cross, accepting the gift of salvation through saving faith in Christ alone. We must, like the Magi, always see beyond the manger to the cross. The Magi, by God's grace, realized the true meaning of the birth of Jesus, spoken by the angel to Joseph, there in Matthew 1:21: *"You are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."*

To save his people, Jesus had to die for them. He died so that all who believe in him will have eternal life. He died so that nothing – not even our physical death – can separate us from the love of God. He was forsaken by his Father so that all who have saving faith in Him will never be forsaken. He was condemned to death so that all who believe in him will be pardoned – the Innocent judged as guilty so that the guilty – you and I – are declared righteous through the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ as *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That's the real Christmas story. It's not in the lights or the tinsel or the gifts that are given. The real Christmas story is in the cross. J.I. Packer put it well, in his book, *Knowing God*. Packer wrote: "The significance of the cradle at Bethlehem lies in its place as the first step that led the Son of God down the pathway to the cross of Calvary."

The true story of Christmas is in the purpose of Jesus' birth, spoken about by the angel to Joseph in Matthew 1:21, *"You are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."* And that Christmas reality – the birth of Jesus to save his people from their sins– is the greatest gift anyone can ever receive.

I don't know what gifts you will receive this year. But I'm sure that you will accept those gifts, even if you might exchange them for something else. But is it possible that some among us have refused the greatest of all gifts – the gift of salvation through saving faith in Christ alone? It is given and accepted by God's grace, and the promise of his grace is given in the free offer of the gospel time and again.

The Bible assures us, in Romans 10:9-10: *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."*

And 2 Corinthians 6 tells us when to make that commitment – from the heart – not just the lips: *"...We urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, 'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."*

In this advent season – and on each day that God grants us His grace to live – may you and I be as wise as the Magi of old. Look far beyond the manger to the cross, where our Savior died. And then focus beyond – to the rock that was rolled away from his empty tomb, as Jesus was raised for our justification.

Through his birth, life, death and resurrection Jesus has completely fulfilled the mission for which he came. He has fulfilled the purpose of his name, given by the angel to Joseph, *“You are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.”* Amen!

- bulletin outline -

“...They opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, and of incense and of myrrh.”
Matthew 2:11b

“Then they offered Him wine mixed with myrrh, but He did not take it.” - Mark 15:23

“A Gift Refused”

Matthew 2:1-11; Mark 15:21-23

- I. Jesus began His earthly life with a gift of myrrh (Matthew 2:11) and ended His life entombed with myrrh and aloes (John 19:39)

- II. In Biblical times myrrh was popular (Genesis 37:25; Revelation 18:13) and had many uses, including:
 - 1) Gift giving (Genesis 43:11)

 - 2) Beauty treatments (Esther 2:12)

 - 3) Perfume (Psalm 45:8)

 - 4) Pain killer (Mark 15:23)

 - 5) Burial (John 19:39)

- III. Applications:
 - 1) Jesus refused wine mixed with myrrh (Mark 15:23), in order to experience the full and complete penalty for our sin. Instead of easing the pain of taking our curse upon Himself,

He accepted wine vinegar to fulfill Scripture (Mark 15:36; John 19:28-30)

2) To know the true meaning of Christmas you and I must always look beyond the manger to the cross, accepting the gift of salvation through faith in Christ alone (Matthew 1:21; Romans 10:9-10; 2 Corinthians 6:1-2)

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