

# Recipe for Joy

Christmas Messages Part 21  
Matthew 2:10-11 12-20-2015

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Summary: The Magi came to worship God and expressed that through giving expensive gifts. Joyful giving is always a crucial element of worship because for it to be joyful requires love and faith.

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**Matthew 2:1** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” **3** When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. **5** “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: **6** “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’” **7** Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” **9** After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

## Introduction

Whenever you sing a Christmas hymn, you know at least some portion of the song is going to be about joy. Just look at the songs we sang this morning: “...Joyful all ye nations rise...” “...O Come All Ye Faithful, Joyful and triumphant...” “...Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come ...” Last week – “Joy to the World.” Every Christmas song talks about joy. It is a joyful season, and that’s fitting. We have

taken our cues from the angels who shouted for joy at the birth of Christ and announced to mankind **good news of great joy**, and so it is fitting that this time of year be all about happiness and rejoicing. But what do you do when you find yourself missing out on all that joy?

We are taking a break today from our study in Psalm 42-43 to do a Christmas message, but it's not really a break because we are really staying on the same topic. Those psalms are all about how to find joy in a time when your soul is downcast. And so I thought for our Christmas message this year we would fill out a little more of what Scripture teaches about joy. We just heard the account from Matthew 2; let's zoom in today just on verses 10-11.

**Matthew 2:10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.**

Other translations say they were **overjoyed beyond measure, they shouted joyfully, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy**. Those are all attempts to translate a very strong statement in the Greek. Normally if they wanted to talk about joy in the extreme, they would say, "He rejoiced with joy." But in this phrase it says: *echarasan* (they rejoiced) *charan* (with joy) so there is the superlative already, but then he adds *megalan* (great – they rejoiced with joy which was a great mega-joy) *sphodra* (exceedingly, or extremely). It is very unusual to find a four-fold compounding of a concept like this. The Holy Spirit really wants us to get how happy these guys were – rejoicing with joy that was especially great joy, and doing that in the extreme.

You might hear all that and think, *I enjoy candy canes and Christmas carols and all that, but I don't know if I'm quite that happy*. Most people enjoy seeing all the lights and decorations and everything, but this kind of over-the-top exhilaration – that's a joy that is up at a whole other level. It is not really the natural response that most people have to Christmas. It wasn't back then either. The Magi stand out in contrast to the other characters in this chapter. Herod's response is outright hostility against Jesus. He wants to kill the child. The religious leaders in Jerusalem had a response of complete indifference. The Magi ask, "Where does the Bible say the Messiah will be born?" They say, "In Bethlehem," and yet none of them go with the Magi to Bethlehem! They don't care. They just go back to their religious duties. No interest whatsoever in going down to Bethlehem.

So not everybody was overjoyed. But these guys were. Why? What was underneath all this joy that was making them so happy? The answer is in the next verse: worship.

## The Joy of Worship

These Magi had travelled probably about 1000 miles across a desert. Why? What was their purpose? To see the child? No. They didn't come to *see* him; they came to *worship* Him.

**Matthew 2:2 ... We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.**

## Worship Defined

The word **worship** literally means *to bow down* or *prostrate* yourself in front of someone. But it is a bowing down that has a particular meaning. If you tripped and fell in your face in front of somebody, you would be doing the physical action of this word, but you wouldn't be worshiping. So what is worship? Throughout the Old Testament the word *worship* is very often used in connection with the word *serve*. We see those two words used together 30-some times in Scripture. And they seem to be almost interchangeable.

**2 Kings 17:33 They worshipped the LORD, but they also served their own gods**

And if you trace those terms through Scripture, you will see a number of other concepts that are also connected to worship – like fearing, following, embracing... I'll give you some examples:

**Joshua 24:14 Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.**

**1 Kings 9:9** they have forsaken the LORD ... and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them.

**Isaiah 56:6** And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who ... hold fast to my covenant...

**Jeremiah 8:2** They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and all the stars of the heavens, which they have loved and served and which they have followed and consulted and worshiped.

So what is worship? You put all that together and you get something like this:

*Worship is when you bow the knee in a way that means, "You are my caretaker and my guide, my provider and my protector, and so you have my heart. I will embrace you, follow you, fear you, serve you, obey you, and be loyal to you." Worship is essentially a giving of yourself to the one you are worshiping: "I belong to you."*

So when it says these guys came to worship the newborn king, it is not saying that they traveled all this way just to kneel down on the ground, get back up, and go home. They came to offer themselves to this child. They came to pledge their loyalty to him, their service, their fear, their obedience, and their very lives to him. And that is what lies beneath all this exuberant joy. You want to avoid the holiday blues? It is not about getting your holiday plans to work out well. It is not about improving your circumstances. The key to finding real joy has to do with worship. The more of a worshiping heart you have, the greater will be your joy when you express that worship.

## Lavish Gifts

So how did they express it?

**Matthew 2:11** ...they fell down and worshiped him. And they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

They expressed their worship by giving Jesus gold, incense, and myrrh. Church tradition has assigned symbolic meaning to these gifts. They say the gold shows Jesus as King, the incense shows his deity, and the myrrh points to his death (since they used myrrh on his body after he died). I honestly don't think we have enough evidence in the text to say that that was what was intended by these gifts because incense and myrrh were used for a lot of things. Both were commonly used in worship in the Old Testament as well as for embalming, ritual cleansing, or just as perfumes and ointments. In fact, the book in the Bible where these two words are used most often is the Song of Songs – where incense and myrrh were used as ointments and perfumes in connection with their lovemaking.<sup>1</sup>

So I don't think we can say for sure that these three gifts were intended to symbolize anything. What we can say is that they were expensive, lavish gifts. Incense and myrrh were imported from Syria, and so they were very pricey. And of course gold was the most valuable commodity of all. In Revelation 18 the merchants are weeping because all the markets have dried up and they can't sell their valuables, and it specifically mentions their gold and incense and myrrh, among other things (Revelation 18:11-13). So all that to show you that these are lavish, extravagant, expensive, costly gifts.

## The connection between worship and giving

Why did they do that? Were they just trying to help out financially – the first baby shower for a young couple in poverty? No, the text is pretty clear - these gifts were part of their worship. That is important, because it teaches us something about both joy and worship that is a major theme in Scripture. And one aspect of true acceptable worship that you will see consistently throughout the Bible is this element of joyfully offering gifts to God.

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<sup>1</sup> The only other place in the Bible where both words are used in the same verse is SOS 3:6.

In Revelation 4-5 we see perfect worship. It is the worship service taking place in heaven, unhindered by any sin, carried out by beings that God created for the specific purpose of worshiping him. Here is what is happening in the perfect worship service:

**Revelation 4:9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down ...They lay their crowns before the throne<sup>2</sup>**

Just like the Magi – fall on the ground and present your treasured possessions to God as gifts. This has always been part of how God has instructed that we worship him. We see it in the Mosaic Law, when God commanded all kinds of offerings and gifts as part of their worship. We see it in the Epistles, where we are instructed about giving to the church. We see it in Jesus' teaching, when He said **“Give to God what is God's”** (Luke 20:25).

We see it in the very first act of worship ever recorded – Cain and Abel. In the entire life span of those two guys, God only tells us of one incident, because that incident teaches us about worship. They both came to worship God, and the only thing Scripture says about their worship was that in both cases it involved giving gifts to God. Giving to God (and doing it the right way) is a crucial component of worship.

**2 Samuel 24:24 I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.**

Why? Because we honor God by giving Him things that are of value to us.

## Why Give to God?

Now on the face of it that is very strange. Why would God want us to give him gifts? That seems odd for a couple reasons.

### God Cannot Be Enriched

First, it's strange because God cannot be enriched. God already owns everything in existence.

**Job 41:11 Everything under heaven belongs to me.**

**Job 22:2 Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise man benefit him?**

**Job 35:6 ... If your sins are many, what does that do to him? 7 If you are righteous, what do you give to him, or what does he receive from your hand?**

Nothing you could ever do could ever harm God, and nothing you could ever do could possibly benefit God in any way.

**Romans 11:35 Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?**

**Psalm 50:9 I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, 10 for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. 12 If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. 13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?**

He does not need anything, he already owns everything, and so when we give him a gift, he doesn't have any more than he already had before we gave the gift.

### He Is Our Provider

Not only that, but unlike God, we do have needs. So God is our provider – not the other way around.

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<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” it is not the saint who cast down their crowns, but the 24 elders.

**Acts 17:25 He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.**

**Psalm 50:9 I have no need of a bull from your stall ... 15 call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.**

God is saying, “What I want from you is not for you to supply my needs. What I want is for you to look to me to supply your needs.”

So why give to God things that he doesn't need and that don't benefit him, and that I do need and that would benefit me to keep them? Why are these Magi giving all these expensive gifts of gold and incense and myrrh to the Son of God? Is it because the Magi were just ignorant and they didn't understand these concepts? No, I don't think that's the answer - unless you want to also call the 24 elders in heaven ignorant. They knew those crowns wouldn't benefit God or enrich him in any way. So what is the point? The point is this – there are other reasons to give besides fulfilling a need.

## **Reasons to Give**

Does a man spend a lot of money on an engagement ring because his fiancée is needy? Is it to help her buy groceries? When your little toddler draws you a picture, or makes a gift for you in Sunday school and he's all excited to give it to you – is that because he thinks you need that gift? Is that why you get your wife something for her birthday, because she is destitute and in need? Those of us who have been married a while understand that one of the worst things you can do for your marriage is to give her something she needs on her birthday. Your job as her husband is to supply her needs all the time. That's not a gift – that is your responsibility. So you give her things that she needs 361 days a year. But on Christmas, her birthday, Mother's Day, and Valentine's Day – that is not the time to replace her old busted broom with a nice, shiny new one.

Now, if someone really is needy, then sure, it's fine to give a gift that also meets the need. But the primary purpose of giving a gift is to express love. And that is why giving gifts to God is an essential component of true worship. We give to God, not because he needs anything, but because giving to him honors him – if it's done the right way. If it's done the wrong way, it dishonors him – that's what we see with Cain and Abel. So what is the right way? The right way is the way the Magi did it – with exuberant joy!

**2 Corinthians 9:7 ... God loves a cheerful giver.**

Your gift will glorify and honor and please God, and it will be accepted by God, only if it is given out of joy – like the Magi's gifts. Why is that? It's because the only way it can possibly be joyful is if there are two underlying ingredients, and one of them is love.

## **Ingredients for Joy**

### **Love**

### **The Joy Comes from Love**

If you love someone, giving them something they really like is enjoyable. If you hate the person, then giving them something they like is painful. You can give either way, but the joy is dependent on whether you love them. One place you can see that is in 2 Corinthians 8. In that chapter Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to follow the example of the Macedonian churches.

**2 Corinthians 8:2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.**

Their joy welled up in generosity. Why are you telling us that Paul?

### **8 ...I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.**

Do you see that? You only get joy welling up to generosity when love is present.

### **24 Therefore show ... the proof of your love (by being generous)**

Giving someone a valuable gift is a gesture that says, "You are more valuable to me than the money I spent on this gift." The reason you give your wife a necklace instead of a broom is because the purpose of the gift is to say, "This gift represents what you mean to me."

## **It Feels Good to Express Love**

When you have love in your heart for someone, that feels good. But as I mentioned before - it feels even better when you express it. When a guy and a girl first fall in love, they don't have to be told to express their love. It is all they want to do. When a child is born into your family, and you look at that little one and your heart just swells with so much love and affection, it doesn't take self-discipline to get yourself to express that love. You just do it. You just take that child into your arms, kiss his cheek or whatever – why? Because when there is love in your heart for someone, it feels good to express it.

## **A Good Measure of Love**

Now if you don't have love for someone, or your love is cooling off, then you don't have a desire to give expressions of love. But the more intense the feelings of love, the more enjoyable it is to express it.

Worship is simply the expression of love for God.

The #1 command in the whole Bible is to love God with all your being. And the more we do that, the more we will want to express it. And expression of true love always involves the desire to give. So for God to command this of us is a blessing, because if the love is there, expressing it through giving will be enjoyable to us. It will increase our joy.

And if the love isn't there, or if it's weak, that will become obvious when you give. You can tell exactly how much love you have for someone by how it feels to give some expression of love. If you see someone at church and you know you should go give him a hug or a warm greeting, but you find it hard – maybe you find it hard to even smile at him – that is a flashing red light on the dash telling you you're running dangerously low on love for that person, right? If you find it hard to give financially to God, does that mean you're a horrible person or a failure as a Christian? No, but it does mean there is an area of love for God in your life that's running low and needs some attention.

### **2 Corinthians 9:7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**

It is a frightening commentary on our worship if God says, "Give whatever is in your heart to give" and we end up giving next to nothing. God says, "Express whatever love for Me you have in your heart" and we say, "OK, here's a dollar. Anything more than that, I won't enjoy."

## **Solution to Joyless Worship: Increase Love**

What is the solution to that? Just give more but with a grudging heart? No, because grudging giving isn't even worship. Don't give at all? No – that's not worship either. God has commanded us to worship him, and part of worship is joyful giving. If you don't have the desire or willingness to give to God, the solution is to increase your love for God. And one way to increase love is to express what little love is already there. When there is some love in your heart, if you express that little bit of love, the act of expressing it will amplify it. So if your attitude is right, and you are seeking the joy that comes through

expressing love to God, you will have more joy after you put your gift in the offering than you did before you put it in.

## Giving Yourself

And it may help to realize that when you give a gift to God that costs you something, you are giving yourself. Sometimes when people want to sound ultra spiritual they will say, “Money doesn’t matter to me. I don’t care about earthly treasures.” That’s foolish. You should care about money because you need it to live. Without it you’ll die. And beyond that, so many of the various components of life depend on money. It is not the only factor, but it is a major factor in how your life goes. Just about everything you do in life involves money at some level. And so when you give some of your money away, you are giving a piece of your life away. Giving away a portion of your livelihood is really giving a part of yourself.

So if worship involves giving all of myself to God, that means I give him my heart, my hopes and dreams, my time, my family, and ... my money. And if I want to stop short of that last one, that tells me something. Money can be a great barometer of the heart. What you do with your money shows what you value. Sometimes people say, “I don’t put money in the offering because I give of my time and service instead.” But God didn’t say, “Pick one – you can give me either your time, or your service, or your heart, or your money – your choice.” What God said was, “I will give you all of me, and I want you to give me all of you.”

And we come out way ahead in that deal, don’t we? And what happens in your heart you realize that you have come out way ahead? Joy. If you truly believe that you are coming out ahead, you’ll be happy. If a woman falls deeply in love with a man, and so they get married, she doesn’t walk away from the wedding thinking, ‘Wow, I just gave my whole life to that man – what a loss.’ No, giving herself to the one she loves feels to her like gain, not loss.

## Faith

And that brings us to the second ingredient for joyful worship. The first one was love; the second one is faith. It glorifies God when I give him money because the more money I give to him, the more I need to trust him to take care of my financial needs. Scripture speaks about honoring God with a tithe. The word *tithe* means 10%, and that seems to be the baseline starting point for giving to God in Scripture. In the Mosaic Law God commanded 10%,<sup>3</sup> but it is not limited to the law of Moses. Way before the law, Abraham gave 10%. And Jacob gave 10% in Genesis 28. And Jesus seemed to affirm the 10% figure in Matthew 23:23. So 10% seems to stand out. It took 10% of the people’s income to support the priests in Old Testament times, it stands to reason it would take about that amount to support the pastors in the New Testament time.

I realize there’s debate on that point, but even if you believe the tithe doesn’t apply in the New Testament time, you still have to acknowledge that even in the New Testament God calls us to give in proportion to our income. In 2 Corinthians 8:11 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul says that each one is to give

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<sup>3</sup> We never see a tithe or offering commanded until the Mosaic Law. There are three major passages in the Law about the tithe Leviticus 27, Numbers 18 and Deuteronomy 14. By the time you get to the period just prior to the birth of Christ (they call that the intertestamental period, because it is the 400 year period in-between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament), the Jews had interpreted these as three separate tithes. So they said you had to give 30%. They came to that conclusion because of what they perceived as differences in the tithe laws in those passages. For example in Leviticus tithe is to support the Levites and Priests, and in Deuteronomy it’s to be eaten by the worshipper. But most likely there was just one tithe, and those apparent differences are not really differences. When Deuteronomy 14 tells the people to eat the tithe on their crops, it doesn’t mean eat it all. That was just a single meal – but in the very next verse it says and “do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own.” (v.27) When God gave the Promised Land to the Jews, He divided it up among all the tribes but one – the tribe of Levi. They didn’t get anything. And they couldn’t do anything to earn a living, because they spent their full time in ministry. So God instituted the tithe to support them (and every third year to support the poor as well). That was the purpose of the tithe that was commanded in the Law.

according to his means – in proportion to his income.<sup>4</sup> So when you put money in the offering box, don't ask, "How many dollars should I put in?" but rather "What percentage of my income should I put in?" God always speaks about our giving in terms of percentage, not amounts. That was true even of the Old Testament freewill offering. The freewill offering wasn't required. It was just a gift people could give if they just had special gratitude and wanted to worship God with something extra. And so you'd think that it could be any amount they wanted, but that wasn't the case. Even a freewill offering had to be in proportion to income.

**Deuteronomy 16:10 celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you.**

The purpose of giving to God is to honor Him, and it does not honor Him if we give Him our scraps and leftovers.

**Leviticus 22:21 When anyone brings ... and offering to the LORD to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to be acceptable.**

God will not accept cheap, lame gifts. It has to be in proportion. So what proportion? I'll leave that to you to decide, but I will say this: if God required the poorest Israelite in the Old Testament to give 10%..., and I live in one of the wealthiest nations in human history and I'm giving 1%..., I think it's a bit of a stretch to say I'm giving in proportion to my income.

Now, here's my reason for bringing all that up. If I give to God in proportion to my income, if "in proportion" is anywhere near the neighborhood of 10% – that is a pretty significant chunk. How are you supposed to make ends meet if you give 10% of your gross income right off the top to God? Many of you can't even make ends meet as it is. One hundred percent of your income isn't enough to pay the bills. How could you ever get by if you gave God 10%? Your only hope would be Philippians 4:19, where Paul thanks them for their generous gift and then says:

**Philippians 4:19 And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.**

Even though you gave all that money away, you are still in great shape financially because you have this promise. **My God will meet all your needs** – that is a promise Paul made to a group of people who were giving generously. Would it also apply to those who are not giving? I don't know. It doesn't say. We do know from other places in Scripture that God provides blessing in response to giving. Speaking of their financial gift in 2 Corinthians 9 Paul says:

**2 Corinthians 9:6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.**

That is in the context of financial giving. So if you don't give, you are likely to have problems financially. But if you do give generously, you will be ok financially because God will supply all your needs according to his riches, and so you will reap generously.

But trusting that promise is kind of scary, isn't it? If I tell you, "God promises to bless you when you pray," then you might say, "Okay, I'll go home and give that a try." If it doesn't work, no big loss. You don't have to have a ton of confidence in the promise to give that a try. But if I tell you, give a significant percentage of your income to God, and then I say, "If you come up short financially, don't worry - you can just live off of Philippians 4:19" – that is pretty scary. Because if that one doesn't work, then you're in trouble. So what does it require for a person to respond to this promise? It requires a lot of what? Faith! You have to *really* believe God's Word to put your financial well-being on the line for a promise.

And that is the other way that our giving to God pleases him - because it shows faith. And faith is what pleases God. He doesn't need our money, but he is pleased when we trust him, and he is displeased when we refuse to trust him. And it is really easy to talk big about how much you believe his promises,

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<sup>4</sup> See also Acts 11:29.



right up until the moment when you have to put your money where your mouth is. You can tell the things you really trust in by where you invest your money.

The question is very simple: do you believe that if you give to God, what you get in return will be more valuable than that money that you gave? Does giving to God feel to you like a loss or a gain?

**Malachi 3:8 “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ “In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse ... 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the LORD Almighty.**

“That was the Old Testament!”

That’s true, it was. But back up to verse 6. What does it say?

**Malachi 3:6 I the LORD do not change.**

A lot of things are different from the old covenant to the new. But one thing that’s not one bit different is God. He has the same personality now that he had then. And back then if even the poorest Israelite failed to give 10% God called it robbery. But if they did give, God promised that he would throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing on them they wouldn’t have room for it. Are we going to look at that and say, “God isn’t like that anymore”? Is God not as generous as he used to be? Is God no longer a rewarder?

**Hebrews 11:6 without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek him.**

God is still a rewarder.

“But in the Old Testament God’s rewards tended to be more material, financial, temporal type rewards. But in the new covenant his rewards are more spiritual, eternal type things.”

I won’t argue with that. But does that mean we have less incentive than they did, or more? Are we going to say, “I can see why they would give to God, because they could expect a financial return. But I’m not really motivated, because all I’ll get is a measly spiritual, eternal reward”?

Remember our question: do you believe that if you give to God, God will reward you with something that is more valuable than the money you gave up? Is it a loss or is it a gain? “But how do I know if God will reward me financially or only with spiritual rewards - like joy or peace or strength? And how do I know if the rewards will come in this life, or not until the next life?” You don’t know. God might do one thing, or he might do the other. He might reward you financially or spiritually. He might reward you now or later. You don’t know what he’s going to do which means you have to *trust* him. If you have to know the details about the reward before hand, then you don’t trust him to be a good rewarder. Giving to God is all about faith.

## **Cain and Abel**

Earlier I mentioned Cain and Abel. The account of Cain and Abel appears at the very beginning of the Bible because right off the bat God wanted to teach us about acceptable worship. Both men worshipped God by giving God a gift, and God accepted the worship from one of them and rejected the other. Why? What made Abel’s offering better?

**Hebrews 11:4 By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.**

Abel’s gift came from a heart of faith; Cain’s didn’t, and so God accepted the one and rejected the other. How can you tell Abel’s was given in faith? Because it was firstfruits.

**Genesis 4:4 Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.**

He brought the first and the best. That takes faith. If you first pay all your bills, and get other obligations squared away, and then give God the leftovers, that doesn't require any faith because your needs are all taken care of before you give. And that is evidently what Cain did.

**Genesis 4:3 ... ain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.**

Nothing about firstfruits – he just brought “some” of his crop. That kind of giving doesn't honor God because it doesn't require any faith.

**Proverbs 3:9 Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops**

## **Must Be Joyful**

So when you put a gift in the box to worship God, how can you tell for sure if it's a Cain type gift or an Abel type gift? How can you tell if the gift is coming from a heart of faith or not? There is a very simple and surefire way to tell. You can tell how much faith is there by how much joy is there. You can tell yourself that God is a rewarder, but it is not going to bring any actual feelings of joy until you really believe that he is a rewarder. That is why God loves a cheerful giver.

**2 Corinthians 9:7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**

God does not love reluctant givers, or givers who see their giving as burdensome, or givers who give to glorify themselves; but He does love a cheerful giver. And that is why the Magi are placed in Scripture as the prototype for all true worshippers of the Messiah.

## **Conclusion: A Beautiful Thing**

Another part of this passage about the Magi that deserves a whole sermon is the fact that the first worshippers of the Jewish Messiah were Gentiles.

This was a hint of the fulfillment of the prophecies about the Messiah being worshipped by all nations.

We'll plan on exploring that at the Christmas Eve message, but for now, let me close with this: In every country on the planet there are people who bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ. No human kingdom has ever become as widespread or as powerful or influential or as pervasive as the kingdom of this child born in Bethlehem. Now to be sure, some human kingdoms have gotten awfully big. Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Alexander the great, Hitler, Stalin - there have been some powerful world leaders who were able to take over huge portions of the globe. But in each case, they accomplished that with their military. Each new territory was forced into submission. But of all the millions and millions and millions in Christ's kingdom, every last one of them, to a person, joyfully, willingly, enthusiastically chose to join His kingdom with all their heart and soul.

And not only do they submit to Him, but they all – every last one of them, worship Him. And they do so with joy. What does that say about him?

Do you want to do something great with your life? Do you want to do something that will bring not a little bit of glory, but great, eternal glory to the Lord Jesus Christ? Pursue your joy this Christmas from worship. Nothing honors him more. Do you remember what Jesus said about the woman who dumped out her very expensive ointment on Jesus' feet in worship? The Disciples said, “Why this waste?” And Jesus responded by saying, “This is a beautiful thing” (Mt.26:10). May the Lord see the joy of your worship this Christmas season and say, “This is a beautiful thing.”

**Benediction: Psalm 100: Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. 2Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. 3Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. 4Enter his gates with thanksgiving and**

**his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. 5For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.**

### **Application Questions (James 1:25)**

- 1) What tends to be the greatest hindrance for you in the area of joyful giving?
- 2) Between increasing your love for God or increasing your faith in His promises, at this point in your life which one seems most urgent for increasing your joy in worship even higher than it is now?
- 3) If you have a story about how God blessed you in response to giving, share it with the group.