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2 CORINTHIANS 9:15

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we come before you now as humble people, needy people recognizing that we are weak. It doesn't take long for us to just look at ourselves and see our inadequacy and unworthiness in life. A lot of times we fill that in with other things. But we ask that you would be that person that just fills us completely. It takes that brokenness that we experience in our world away. We're concerned about important things in our world, the things that are going on and relevant in our society today. Lord, I know that in order to do that we have to understand your heart, to bring solutions to painful situations in life. Lord, as we open your word now I ask that you would speak to us and teach us something important. We know that when we open your word that your word is alive. Any time we open it it is new and fresh and we can get new insights from it. So we do that now and ask that you would speak to us through your word this morning. In Jesus' name, amen.

When I was a kid I loved Christmas. My parents made Christmas really fun for us in our lives. Also I memorized scripture as I was young. One of the first verses I ever memorized was this verse – *Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift*. I was only like two years old when I memorized this verse, so when I would come to the *unspeakable* part I would kind of yell it out because I could hardly say the word *unspeakable*, I think anyway. But *thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift* was this very important verse that I memorized when I was just two years old.

Well when I was three years old I remember that I was somehow (and I don't really remember all the details) given the opportunity to ask Jesus into my heart. So I did. I remember it was a choir loft of the church. It was at one of the sessions of the VBS program. I was there alone with the teacher, I don't know why, but I was in the choir loft with her. That's where class was, I remember that. But then everybody else was gone and I prayed to ask Jesus to come into my heart at three.

Three years old. I'm sure I had no idea the fullness of the gospel at that point and what I was doing, but at that point I made a commitment to Jesus in my heart that meant a lot to me. I wanted that. I wanted what my parents had. I wanted something and I learned more about that as I grew up because my parents nurtured my faith and the commitment that I had inside of me. So when I was six years old I ended up coming to another sense of understanding of who God was and in kind of a new one. So at that point I got baptized. That baptism was a significant spiritual event in my history where I got to know God a little bit more.

Now I could have looked back at six years old at my three year old experience and said, "Well I didn't know what that meant back then, maybe I wasn't saved." There are people today who

make a commitment to Jesus several times in their childhood or as they're growing up. Why? Because they come to a greater realization about what this means.

The word *gift* in this verse, *unspeakable gift*, was probably my favorite verse because I loved Christmas, I liked gifts. But I got to understand that the *gift* part is Jesus. As I continued to grow in my elementary age, my parents gave me opportunities to serve the Lord at church, to go to Christian camps, to be part of Bible clubs, to memorize scripture. In the midst of that, God nurtured my faith even more during those years and I got to know what that special gift is a little bit more. I grew in my commitment of that it means to follow Jesus and to trust Him as my Lord and Savior.

So when I got to be fourteen years old I was given the opportunity somehow through this guy that asked me, "Have you ever thought about dedicating your life to fulltime Christian ministry?" For me that was the next step in my personal pilgrimage with the Lord. So there was kind of this experience that I had at fourteen years old that communicated to me something really important about His gift. This unspeakable gift could impact me at fourteen. So I made this commitment.

I could have at fourteen have said, "Wow, when I was three years old I sure didn't know what I was doing. When I was six years old I didn't know what I was doing." But rather I realized that I was coming into a new understanding of what salvation is for me that I didn't know before at fourteen years old.

But I have to tell you, the clincher for me was when I went to seminary. In seminary you study the Bible and you study theology. I had a thirteen-week class, and the whole subject of the class was salvation. We studied everything you could think of of salvation. How a person comes to Christ, what benefits they receive from Christ, how it impacts your life, all these things. We studied so many things about what Christ died on the cross means and what it means for me personally. We studied all that stuff.

While I was in that class I go, "Wow. This is bizarre. I never knew there was so much involved in this commitment to Jesus Christ. Maybe I'm not saved." I remember saying that to myself. I'm saying maybe I need to get saved again because now I know how much bigger it is than I knew when I was three or six or fourteen years old. It is big.

This word *unspeakable* in the original language is only used this one place in the whole Bible. It's indescribable. It's so big you don't know how to talk about it. It's unspeakable. That's the idea here. You don't know how to describe it because it is so immense, so powerful, so amazing, so big. The older I get the more I realize how powerful that is. It's the gift that keeps on giving and it continues to give.

I think this is important. I want you young people to understand this. I think that if at fourteen years old I had not had my faith nurtured into being fourteen, then I could have thought this: "I'm growing out of my faith. That commitment I made when I was a young person was really a childhood commitment and now I'm older now. I've grown. I really don't need that. That was something from my childhood." Or when you get older and things happen, you kind of say, "Well I've kind of grown out of that."

The reality is in order for us to have a personal faith, we must bring it into today. We can't rely on a past conversation experience to say, "Oh, I'm saved today." We must rely on a past conversion experience. I was saved today, but that faith needs to carry us through so that today I'm experiencing. We can't rely on last week's faith for today's experiences. Because today I'm going to face new challenges. I must bring the faith that I have grown up with into that experience. That's what it means to understand this immeasurable, incomprehensible, unspeakable gift.

If we're not careful to bring it into where we are right now, we can end up saying this: "It's not relevant for my life today. The things that I'm experiencing now, the challenges I'm experiencing now don't include faith." I'm married now. Or I have kids now. Or I've got a job now. Or I got a divorce. Or I'm an addict. Does God fit into all those things? Of course He does. It's an indescribable gift. It's so big that it's amazing that we can bring it into our lives right now today in a very personal way.

Now what I'd like to do is I want to take you back into that passage. That passage, I don't know if you saw it, was back in 2 Corinthians 9. I'm going to take you back to the beginning of that chapter. Because verse 15, now that I look at it, is the climax of a whole passage that describes who we are as Christians that make us different than other people. I really like this. Look at chapter 9. I'm going to show you parts of it for time constraints, but I'm going to take you through this passage and explain to you how we get to this part where Paul finally says – *Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift* (that's verse 15).

Right now we're at verse 1. It says – *There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.*

Let me give you some background to this story. Paul here is writing to the Corinthians. The Corinthians lived on the Grecian peninsula. There's the Italian peninsula over here. Then there's Macedonia, then Jerusalem is over here, and Israel is over here. There was famine going on in Israel. Now when a famine takes place, it's a very challenging experience.

The first time I went to Kenya I had told the people of a neighboring church that I was going to go to Kenya. They said, "We are supporting a child in Kenya through World Vision. If you would go visit that child, we'll give you gifts to take to that child." So I thought what an adventure. I'm going to go do this. So I went with a World Vision guide and we got into a Land Rover and drove five hours, first of all on tarmac roads that had bombshells on them. They had pits in them that you had to maneuver around. Finally we got on these dirt roads and we went out to nowhere land so that now brush is hitting us on both sides of the Land Rover. It finally opened up into this place. I was asking questions along the way to learn about the experience, what's going on here and what's happening in this particular situation.

It turns out that we visited that family that wasn't expecting us because we had no way of letting them know we were coming. When we showed up with all of these gifts they didn't know what

to do with them. We brought them a white dress and Josh was with me. They thought we were trying to marry the girl to be married to my son, Josh, who was nine years old.

As we were going through these camps, the World Vision took us on this tour. We went to a camp that there was a famine going on. We had packed a lunch. They told us to bring our food with us because obviously there wasn't going to be any food there. We pulled in with our Land Rover and we got out and we saw as you see on TV sometimes, you know the World Vision experience, and children who are starving and people who are sitting around. We're in a camp now because food would be delivered today and everybody will get some sorghum that will last them a few days. It will have to last them a week, but they only get a couple days worth. Just to look in that situation were the famine existed. Obviously when famine exists you've got depression, discouragement, a high unemployment rate. So you've got enough famine and we experienced that.

Let me just say this. When it was time for me to eat my lunch, I wasn't hungry. I just felt sick by this. I said, "Can I give my lunch to these people?" And they told me no you can't do that. If you start giving your lunch to these people, first of all it will make them sick because the food you eat they're not eating, but also what are you going to do with that little lunch that you have with all of these. I'm not Jesus who can multiply all the food. But my heart went out.

So Paul has this same kind of experience. I don't know if it's that dramatic World Vision experience, but the people in Jerusalem are suffering. They don't have food and they are believers. Many of them have lost their jobs because they're Christians because of the persecution that exists around the world. You know every Sunday there's a group of people that come up here and pray for the persecuted church all over the world. These people were persecuted to their face. There's a famine going on and so Paul is collecting an offering for them. That's what the story of 2 Corinthians 9 is all about. It's gathering the money for them to take. These people are in need and Paul is collecting the gift.

I'm going to jump to verses 6-8. He's describing the fact this is what it's like when you give. Think about the giving that you do and how giving fits into our hearts and lives. *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* In other words, those who are givers are the ones who benefit on the other end. *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

Now this passage is sometimes presented as a passage to encourage giving to a church. Maybe that's good, but that's not what I'm emphasizing today. I just want you to see that Christians are givers. They are people who have something to give and they share that with other people. We have something to offer.

Let me take you to the next part of the passage because this describes why we have something to offer to other people. Look down at verse 10 as it continues. *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.* The idea is that God gives to us so that we can give to other

people. *You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*

I don't know if you're seeing all the 'all's' and the 'everything' that's mentioned in here, but there's a sense that we have been blessed with whatever. For some of us that's money. For others of us that's time, talents, gifts, whatever it might be. And in the midst of all of that we have something to offer. Because God has blessed us. It's just a part of our identity that we are givers. We're thinking about other people.

I like the story of the Marine who came out of the doughnut shop. And when he came out of the doughnut shop eating his doughnut, he saw a nine year old peering into the doughnut shop watching the guys make doughnuts. So he makes a comment to the guy and says, "You really like those doughnuts. They're good in there. Why don't you go get some?" He starts to walk away and the boy says, "I don't have any money. I just like to watch them make the doughnut."

The Marine started to walk away, but then he turned around and he had an idea. So he went back into the shop and bought a dozen glazed doughnuts in a box. He brought them back out of the shop and he said to the boy, "Here. Here's some doughnuts for you." The boy took the doughnuts and was just so shocked when he opened them up and saw a dozen glazed doughnuts. He looked up at this man, looked down at the doughnuts, looked up and he said, "Are you God?"

I think that when we give, we are taking on that character that God has. Because God is the one who gave His indescribable gift that we can enjoy. We are most like God when we are giving to others. That brings us all the way down to the end of the passage. That's where the verse, 2 Corinthians 9:15, fits in. *Thanks be to God for his inexpressible, unspeakable, indescribable gift!*

I wanted to take you on that pilgrimage because it's that amazing thing that happens inside of us when we understand what giving is all about. We have something to share. Every one of us does. God provides so many blessings to us. But the most important gift that we have is that gift that we have inside of our hearts.

Yeah, we could give money gifts. We could give talent gifts, we could give a lot of things, but it's the heart gifts that are so important because people's hearts are hurting today. No matter where you go you'll see people that are broken, people that are hurting, people that are struggling in their lives, and they need something for their hearts. Yes, we can cheer them up just with our presence many times, and that's something that we can give to people. But there's something deeper inside of us that Jesus Christ has done inside of us that He does for other people that we can share. We have something to give because we receive so much. That's what makes this gift so indescribable. It touches each person in a different way.

We could have all these stories. Everybody could share a story about how God has touched them and we would go, "Wow." It's an indescribable gift and so amazing and different. We can give kindness to someone. We can give compassion.

You remember last Sunday? Last Sunday we had that lady who's immigrating to the United States. She came to our church for the first time. She had been in America for eight days and she

came here. Marionita is her name. She stood here and we gave her a fruit basket and welcomed her to America. Her impression of America is right here...us. She's grateful to be in America because of what she sees here. We're giving to her and sharing with this woman who's immigrating to America.

You know all those frozen turkeys I set up on this stage here for you guys to take and give away? Why? Because our church is empowering people. We want to be a church that cares for others because we have something to offer. We have a Care Fund and out of that Care Fund we blessed a couple of families this year. They are blessed because of the way we give.

Christmas is about giving. It's not just about getting. There's a time – I don't know how old you were when this happened to you, when you moved from" it's all about me getting the gifts" to giving gifts and getting excited about that.

I was working with a fifteen year old boy this week and he was telling me that he's excited about Christmas. I wanted to know why, so I said, "What are you excited about?" He said, "Well I'm going to get a bunch of stuff for Christmas." So he hasn't made the shift yet. He's getting still, and that's fine. He's going to enjoy Christmas and all the things he's going to get.

I remember when I was an older teenager... I really liked Christmas, don't get me wrong. Christmas is great, but I was feeling anxious about the gift-giving stuff. Are the people going to like the gift I got? Or am I going to get things that I like? So I was feeling anxious about gift-giving and receiving. So it made that part of the Christmas experience uncomfortable. I was glad when the presents were all done at that point.

And then I met my wife. I met my wife when I was eighteen years old. That next year when we celebrated Christmas (I got married when I was twenty-one), but she just influenced my Christmas a lot. Because when I was nineteen years old we had this great idea to make gifts for everywhere. So we went to the ceramic shop where they had all of this white plaster everywhere and we picked out certain things, one for each person. I remember my brother that's a little younger than me. He played football at the local high school and he was good at football, so we got him a football lamp. It had all the pieces to it. All we needed to do was clean it up and paint it and create it for him. So we painted it. We painted something for every one of the people in our family and then you put the antique finish on and then you gloss them all. They were nice things we made. I could hardly wait for Christmas to come. My wife had changed my whole understanding of Christmas.

My wife is an artist. I'm an artist too, but nothing near the kind of artist she is. My artist was in things like music and other things. But she was the fine arts person who could do things with paint. For me I try to color in the lines, but she doesn't need lines. She can create something beautiful out of that. So she brought that into my life and taught me some very valuable things about Christmas. I love Christmas. But for me Christmas is about giving; it's not just about receiving.

I think that's part of what we're learning in this passage. The truths of this passage that we're looking at are these. One – we have something to give others. We need to be thinking about how

we're going to bless others, think about how we're going to care of other people. It might just be a listening ear. Sometimes it's putting up with the irritations with people a bit more.

Another fifteen year old boy that I met with this week, I've been working with him for several years, but now it's come to a point where now he realizes that he snaps at people. Especially when he's irritated or they don't get it as fast as he does. He snaps at people and he says things that are unkind. His parents are frustrated with that, so we're all talking about it together, and he realizes that this is the next step for him in his own personal development. He really needs to change that because he doesn't want to be this person who reacts so quickly. So we started developing a plan and how his parents can coach him in the midst of this.

I'll be eager to see what happens in two weeks when I meet with him again. But the whole process for him is learning how to give to others. He's learning the word we're working on – how to be gracious. That's what he's learning at fifteen years old. Gracious is all about giving a little bit more time to someone. I told him you're in a family and you'll have opportunity to practice. He said, "Yeah, God blessed me with a really irritating family. I'm sure I'm going to grow a lot in this." I'm sure he will grow a lot in this! Because he's going to work on it in his life.

We have a lot of opportunities because we live with imperfect people and those imperfect people need for us to give them gifts. Each one of us needs that in our own lives. So as Christians, we are givers. But the best givers are the ones that are giving out of what they've received from God.

This indescribable gift is just amazing to me. I'm now fifty-nine years old. I'm still amazed at how big this gift is, this indescribable gift. This week we saw a ninety-year-old man accept Jesus Christ into His heart. That's amazing. We saw a man get healed of cancer this year. You remember earlier this year we saw the couple who had been divorced for six years and then they got back together in June, were remarried, and they stood here and gave testimony to their remarriage. This is an indescribable gift. It's so powerful and amazing what God does in our lives and I am excited to see what He's going to do going forward because it's an indescribable gift.

I don't know what's going to happen. It's just so amazing and it makes every day exciting for me. I have something to offer. I have something to give. I can share with people who have never heard Jesus. I can share with people who have heard Jesus before. But I can hardly wait to see what God's going to do in this next year in this area of an indescribable gift. I trust that as you experience this in your own life, you'll have something to share. It's something powerful.

Oh yeah. We can share things. We can share ideas. We can share philosophies. We can share all kinds of stuff, but the power is in Jesus. And that offering that we share with other people is a Christmas gift that's not just for Christmas. It's something that we do all year round. I trust that if you've never accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior that you would want to do that because there is something powerful there in this indescribable gift that you want inside of you so that you're giving not just out of yourself, but you're giving out of something that God has done inside.

That's the purpose of the passage. So the passage is saying, "Hey guys, I want to get some money to give to the people and you guys are already great in that. I'm sharing your testimony with the people in Achaia and this is great. I want you to know just don't give grudgingly. Give out of your own heart whatever you decide to give. When you give generously it's like sowing, and you're going to reap in return. You know that. So I'm going to collect this gift when I'm with you and I'm going to take it to Jerusalem. *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.*" That's how he ends the passage. God has blessed us and that's why we give and that's why we share with other people.

Would you stand with me? Let's pray together.