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Christmas Gifting
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As Christmas approaches, we look for a way to make this Christmas the best ever. Most often Christmas is made special by giving to those who cannot return the favor. Recently, my wife and I had the opportunity to help a relative in need. As we met their need, we discovered these principles of how you know a gift is from God, and particularly how a monetary gift can be known to be “from God.”

1. A gift which is from God is just that “a gift” and not a loan. The debt incurred is not one which requires repayment; it is a debt of gratitude which will be repaid to others not to the one who gave the gift. Truly, this is the gift “which keeps on giving,” as the echo of the original gift echoes through the years, ricocheting from one person to another.
2. A gift which is from God carries with it the responsibility of good stewardship. Gifts are often squandered, lost, or discarded, but a “gift which is from God,” is treasured, cared for and often passed on to others.
3. A gift which is from God is for more than a person asks and/or for more than they need at the moment. This is one of the things which identifies it as a gift from God – He always gives more than we ask. It is a gift which overflows in its abundance.
4. A gift from God is given without any suggestion or requirement that more money will ever be given, which is how God gives – He does not obligate Himself to respond positively to future requests simply because He fulfilled a prior one.
5. A gift from God is given with a prayer that the “goodness of God will lead the person” to know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and that the recipient will teach his/her children to love God with their whole heart.
6. A gift from God is given with the hope that it will encourage the recipient with the knowledge that they are special and that the gift will have a miraculous effect on the life of the recipient which is beyond the value and the life of the gift. That is how God’s gifts always work. It is like the priest in *Les Miserables* who said to the thief, “With this silver you must become an honest man.” And, by the way, the gift mentioned above is having a miraculous effect on the family to which it was given.
7. A gift from God brings great joy to the giver as being the agent of God in benevolence to others is always accompanied by joy.
8. In all of the great religions of the world, the value of a gift is enhanced geometrically when that gift is given anonymously. This is sometimes hard to make happen, but when it does happen, it is especially beneficial to the giver and to the recipient.

9. A gift from God is given with the knowledge that something which is old to you is new to others. If you want to take something old and make it new -- give it away!
10. A gift is particularly evidenced as being from God and is of great value to the giver when the gift costs you something, i.e., when it is a sacrifice, causing the giver to "give up" something in order to give. It is through the sacrifice of the giver that the gift to another gains great value.

This Christmas, as you delight in giving to those you know and love, find someone you do not know and/or perhaps someone whom you do not love and give them a gift of yourself. Give them a gift which is founded on the greatest love: love which does not require anything in return. The baubles you give or receive will never sparkle as brightly as when you have given them having met and gone beyond the needs of others. The toys for your children will never be as wonderful as when they are enjoyed after meeting the needs of others.

And, if your heart is upon "giving a gift" which is "as from God," the opportunities will always present themselves. This year before Thanksgiving, a teacher in a distant community saw a child crying. When asked why he was crying, he said, "We are out of school so long for Thanksgiving, I will be hungry before we come back to school." Who of us could eat another meal knowing that this child is hungry. Oh, we all know there are hungry children somewhere but we don't know their names and we haven't seen their faces. This story went from one to another to another. Now this child and his five brothers will have a wonderful Christmas and through the miracle of H.E.B. gift cards, no matter how long the Christmas Holiday, he will not be hungry this Christmas or ever again. His family will travel in a suburban rather than stacked unsafely in a compact car. The suburban is not new, but it is to them. And, if you could have heard the exclamations of six children who have new warm coats and new clothes to wear, you would know that there are gifts which can be as gifts from God.

And, as you give a gift which is by its nature a gift from God, give the gift of your love. On November 16, 2006, I attended the funeral of one of my colleague's mother in Alexandria, Louisiana. I intentionally arrived early enough to visit my father's grave which is nearby in Kingsville. I had thought for a while about an act of grieving and of love -- for by their nature the two are the same -- which would probably seem silly to some.

Grief is never right or wrong; it just is. Some grieve quietly; some with loud sobbing. Some grieve privately and some publicly. Probably, the only limitation on "right" grieving is time. If you grieve for less than six months in face of a great loss, you may not have processed all of the issues with which you need to deal; if you are still grieving seriously after two years, you may need help coming to closure.

My heartache over my father's death has moved to closure. Tears are few and memories are many and they all bring joy. Yet, there is one other thing I wanted to do. I went to the mall in Alexandria and found a department store which sells Godiva chocolate. For years,

I had bought my father a four-pound box of Godiva chocolate for Christmas and I wanted to buy him one more box. I bought a smaller box and then drove to the cemetery and placed the box on his headstone. I knew it will be stolen by a human or destroyed by an animal but it brought me a moment of joyful remembrance of this wonderful man and an experience we shared.

As I drove home on Friday, I realized that this act did not give any pleasure to my father, but that all of the times that I hugged him, held his hand, delighted in him did. In reality, I could never give him a gift which was significant because there just was not anything he wanted. But, I could give him hugs and kisses; I could give him words of affection and of praise. As I drove home, after spending the night with Mother in Natchitoches, I began to think about how many hugs and kisses were enough to have shared with a person you loved greatly. How many expresses of affection, commitment and love were enough?

As I thought about the answer, I realized it was a quantifiable number and the answer could be expressed in an algebraic equation. In this equation, "X" equals the number of times you kissed your father, your mother, your wife or whomever it is that you have lost. "X" equals the number of times you hugged your brother, your sister, or your friend. And, the equation which accurately expresses the number of times you could have, or would have, or should have kissed or hugged that loved one? It is: " $x + 1$."

The unknown in the equation is how many times you had expressed love, affection or devotion, but the total --to be completely satisfying -- would always be " $+ 1$ ". It is never possible to say, "I love you," often enough. It is never possible to hug a loved one frequently enough. Lost opportunities to affirm another can never be regained and even if you never miss an opportunity, the final figure will always be " $x + 1$."

Tell your children often and each day that you love them. Tell your grandchildren twice a day that you love them. Hug and kiss your wife or husband. Make sure they know that you are what you are because of them. Children, take your mother and father in hand at every opportunity; hug and kiss them, savor each moment with them, for the time will come when the only way you can add to the value of " $x + 1$ " is in your memory of the value of " x ."

Oh, I would give a great deal to hug my father once more; I would pay a great price to kiss him once more, but that does not come from a sense of guilt for missed opportunities. It comes from the depths of love we shared, not because we understood each other perfectly, or that we shared a common life, but because in the depths of our soul there is a bond which time and space cannot destroy.

Christmas will be special this year. I give thanks for the hugs and kisses my father and I shared. I intend to wrap numerous gifts which will be filled with hugs and kisses for all those I love. The day will come when I will not be able to add the " 1 " to the equation, but I can make the " x " as large as possible.

And, as a special tribute to my father, each year I intend to buy a four-pound box of Godiva Chocolate and give it to a stranger. I did this year. I gave it to a doorman at a hotel. As I told him about my father and why I was giving him this gift, he shed tears and told me that his mother had died six months before. This simple and maybe silly act on my part brought comfort and joy to him. I can't wait until next year to tell someone else I don't know about my father and to give them the gift I wish I could give to my Dad.

As you wrap gifts this year, find someone you don't know and give them a gift. Make sure that when you wrap the sparkly baubles for your family that you include lots of hugs and kisses, for in the end, the only gift which will be remembered is the size of the "x" in your personal " $x + 1$ " life equation. As you meet the need of a stranger and/or as you give a stranger a gift, it may just be that you can add a "1" to the "x" of your love for another.

This year more than ever, the greatest gift we all want is "peace on earth and good will toward men." May it be so in our lifetime. Remember, it is your life and it is your health.