

Brace yourselves: Christmas is coming. Today is the Sunday before Black Friday, and our newspapers, mailboxes, and our email inboxes will be crammed with enticing ads luring us toward the hottest sales, gadgets, and toys of the year. And although I'm not going to pile on with the "presents bad, Jesus good" routine here, I think we should all be made aware, if we aren't already, that during the next few days, the pre-Christmas advertising will be over the top. Apparently, our retail oriented and consumer driven society desperately wants to define our holiday desires.

Families are especially targeted, what with poor little Johnny and Jamie living an incomplete life without this year's must-have Christmas toys. Of course every year the toy changes, but we all remember the biggest hits of the past. Mr. Potato Head, Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs are deep in the archives of history. The '80s brought us the Rubik's Cube, Cabbage Patch Kids, Transformers and Pound Puppies. While the '90s offered GameBoys, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Pokémon, and Beanie Babies. In the new millennium, Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony made video-game systems and other electronics have taken over the Christmas market.

Today, hockey players would blush at the brutality with which parents go after "this year's hot Christmas toy." It seems as though every year a parent brawl at a Popular retail store like Walmart or Target makes headlines. Remember the reports years ago of parents trampling each other, or offering \$1,000 bribes, to get a Cabbage Patch Kid? The Tickle Me Elmo rage created mob scenes reminiscent of Depression-era bank runs.

Can you begin to imagine a world where parents showed equal passion to secure the emotional well-being and *spiritual development* for their children? Although Christmas is still a month out, and Advent a week away, Black Friday advertising will be pushing the concept of Christmas gifts — good and bad ones —

right now. Three weeks ago, actually! So this is a great time to allow Scripture, God's Word, to bring us some balance. Especially today as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday and seek to put Jesus first and foremost in our lives!

Instead of merely developing our Christmas wish-lists, *what about focusing on a Christ-wish list?* Please take note that I didn't say, "Rather than making a Christmas wish-list." I'm not about to bash Christmas gift giving, although that might be an appropriate topic for another time. For this morning, as we explore our second lesson, I'm going to suggest we develop and focus our attention on a *Christ-wish list*. And the gifts we might hope to receive can be taken directly from Colossians chapter one.

Now, the first gift that we should add to our list is God's gift of strength. Paul writes, "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power." Apparently, the Apostle wants the people of the church at Colossae, and all followers of Christ, to remember that God offers an ongoing gift that accompanies us in living out our lives here and now: his power making us strong. Paul uses the greek word DUNAMIS, which means power, and it is also the root of words like dynamite, dynamo, and dynamic. Understanding this can give us a clue about what he means here. God will strengthen us in places of our weakness in our inner lives.

According to Paul, God wants us engaged with and dependent on him when anxiety, depression, stress, doubt, frustration, cynicism and bitterness battle against who he wants us to be, who he wants us to become. God's invisible power brings us interior strength. And it's available to us by faith so we might experience it as a tangible reality. U2's Bono shared a line in the song "Moment of Surrender" that has been his spiritual mantra for years: "vision over visibility." It's an insistence on looking past what you can see, and into what could be — what you believe to be

true. That's Christianity. But more specifically, it's the way toward being made strong with God's power.

The next gift we should jot down on our *Christ-wish* list is God's gift of patience. In our second lesson Paul offers up the following suggestion, "May you be prepared to endure everything with patience." Of course control freaks will most likely recoil at this idea, but the reality is that we have no idea what's coming next in life. Sadly, the odds of winning the lottery are slim to none, and surprise parties happen only once or twice in a lifetime. That means the unexpected is almost always bad news.

Cancer in a loved one. Being laid off from work. Getting sideswiped and injured in a car accident. Being betrayed by a trusted friend or Spouse. We never plan for these times, so we are rarely prepared for them. The only thing we can bring to the table when we are faced with difficult circumstances is the character we've developed beforehand. That's why Paul prays that we should be prepared to endure everything with patience and with virtue that can weather the unexpected.

It's a God-granted gift we partner in cultivating, and it carries us through the unforeseen. To walk life's trials, in a way that honors God, is like navigating a balance beam. Both sides have easy drop-offs. Complaining. Hopelessness. Anger. Self-absorption. But, if we want to stay upright, and if we want to avoid falling, we will require the balance of godly patience.

Number three on our list is the Gift of Joyful Gratitude, or as Paul declares, "Joyfully giving thanks to the Father." Joy and gratitude, like patience, are more developed attitudes than momentary emotions. Emotions come from our brains, but these attitudes have been forged from our souls. The Apostle has witnessed spiritual fruit slowly born in the Colossians over time. But it's almost as if he has a feeling, or an inkling, that something bad might happen. It's gone well thus far, but

things could hit the fan. He's seen too much persecution and warfare against other churches.

It's almost as if Paul wants to call out a godly attitude in the Colossians, and in us, that can combat the difficulties of the spiritual life. So, he prays that their joyful gratitude toward God would expand — from what the Lord has already done for us, to what we'll need from Him down the line. If asked, is there a single Christian who wouldn't wish to be more joyful? More grateful toward God? Who wouldn't want to experience the depth of these attitudes from a soul level? So let's join Paul in praying for these qualities. Let's learn to live out of our hearts. Let's strive to move more toward a joyful and grateful soul, than we do toward bringing joy to our kids with an Elmo that Transforms-Into-a Storm Trooper doll. By the way, it'll most likely be on eBay for \$600 this Saturday.

After verse 12, Paul leaves his prayer wish-list for the saints, and he becomes more Christological. In other words, he begins to focus his attention on what God has done for us on account of Jesus. And if we look at the implications of Paul's descriptions of Christ, they can point us toward many other things to ask God for. But, instead, let's focus on one final gift to add to our list, and that is the gift of the giver. “[H]e is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”

Here's something we should long for: a surprise gift. That rare gift you receive that you didn't know to ask for, but was exactly what you wanted. Jesus is to possess the first place in everything. He should be priority number one in our lives. Borrowing a liberating idea from an author and social critic by the name of Peadar O'Guilin in his book *The Call*, we only ever live life before “an audience of One.” That means we owe no allegiance to other forces or public opinions — the boss, the neighbors, the hot trends, the magazine images of beauty, the people we feel the pressure to impress, the must-have Christmas gifts.

We don't answer to them. They don't define us. They can't change our souls. We answer only to Christ the firstborn. Our lives are a play acted before an audience of One. And then we realize that the Giver, of all the above-mentioned gifts that Paul lifts up, has given himself as the Gift: "[T]hrough him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things."

With all that Paul wishes for Christians, and everything else we find in his letter to the Colossians to encourage our own *Christ-wish lists*, perhaps we should add one more thing to the top of our lists. The gift of Reconciliation. The complex Greek word it comes from carries the idea of restoring things completely. After an original state of harmony has been corrupted, reconciliation brings it back. God was *pleased* to do this. And "all things" means no person or story is outside of the hope of change.

No situation is too irreparable for God! Coming into Advent and the Christmas season, we can receive God's gifts of strength patience, and Joyful gratitude, and along with these blessings we can experience and extend the reconciliation of Jesus Christ. And, is there anything better we could ask for this Christmas or any other day? Amen.