



Christmas Presents-Part 1

Sacrificing Like the Wise Men

Pastor Mike Fabarez

And as you're taking your seat why don't you grab your Bibles and turn to a very familiar Christmas passage that I think we could use this morning, Matthew Chapter 2. We need to hear it. It made me think of Emily Post, the late queen of etiquette, who I'm assuming would frown upon the modern age. Don't you think? I don't think she'd feel good about the loss of civility, the fading of manners, the niceties, the courtesies, all that stuff that she stood for in what seems now to be a bygone era. I think she would definitely frown upon our society. Certainly, I mean, I think of something simple like going to a dinner party and failing to bring a gift for the host or the hostess. I mean, she would have nothing of that, and yet that's commonplace today. Although, our society is not so uncivilized that people show up still for birthday parties without a present. Still, I mean, they bring gifts for birthday parties. Oh, unless of course you're talking about the celebration of Christ's birth, then everyone's concerned about presents for the other guests and not presents for Christ. At least in most cases people don't give it thought.

Now I understand why, of course, what do you get Christ for Christmas? Right? He can't use a necktie, and you know, I don't know what I would possibly bring him. Matter of fact, all of our kids were up on this platform last week singing about that. I jotted down the lyrics as they sang: "Just what do you offer a baby king? If this is the one we've been waiting for, he's worthy of riches and so much more, what can I give, what can I bring to the king of the world who has everything?" That's a really good question. But when it was actually physically happening and this child, this baby Jesus was there, not, by the way, in the manger, but later in a house in Bethlehem, probably a year to 18 months after, you've got in that scene some very unexpected people coming from the east bringing presents, very thoughtfully chosen presents for the King. That's a good precedent for us. It's not a bad helpful reminder, and if I can just this morning allow that template to motivate us to think this Christmas in the next week to say, how can I think more carefully about this celebration that we're having. I know it's a cultural recognition and all that, but we as Christians, looking at the incarnation, thinking about the birth of Christ, we want to celebrate the birth of Christ. How can I bring something to Christ? Not just trying to pick out what my father-in-law is going to like for Christmas or my, you know, my brother. I want to pick some presents for Christ.

So let's look at a passage that may motivate us in that regard this morning. Matthew Chapter 2 verses 1 through 12. Matthew Chapter 2 verses 1 through 12, a cadre of these so-called wise men from the east bringing gifts to Christ. I'll read it for you from the English Standard Version beginning in verse 1. "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and we've come to worship him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea for it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel"'. Verse 7.

"Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and he ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.' After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them

until it came to rest over the place where the child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going to the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts," there it is, "gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."

Now if you open up your worship packet this morning and saw the worksheet or downloaded it before you came into the building or maybe you downloaded when you got here and you saw the first word, I usually provided you the first word of every point. When you saw "sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice" you think, "This is not a Christmas sermon." Right? This sounds terrible. But let me tell you this, when it comes to sacrificing for Christ, no matter what it is, I mean the Bible is so clear even in this passage, it didn't take but a few more chapters, in Matthew Chapter 10, he says even if you were to sacrifice a cup of cold water, which doesn't seem like much, he says, "You won't lose your reward." I'm not preaching you something here to burden you this morning, but I am telling you when you bring a gift to Christ, so to speak, you bring him thoughtfully something you're going to offer to Christ, and it's a sacrifice, I mean, it won't really feel like a sacrifice if we understand everything about who Christ is and what he did. I mean, it's going to be an easy sacrifice to make. But it's a sacrifice, I don't want to downplay that. I just got to tell you it is so worth it. There is no sacrifice that's worth making more than sacrificing something for someone, who is called here, is the king of the Jews, because he's more than that. Back to Genesis 12 and 15 and 17, he will be the king of the world. This is important for us.

So let's look at these first six verses and see if we can, at least, I'm mean poetically, give me some latitude here this morning, to see a pattern historically and geographically that might help us and challenge us to kind of spiritually think through our lives in this 21st-century America. Think of how we might offer something to Christ this Christmas. Let's look at it, get a little history here. Matthew Chapter 2 verse 1, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea," the southern part of Israel, "in the days of Herod the king." Now, if you've been with us in our Luke study, Herod, the Herod that we have in Luke 24 is Herod Antipas. We've been talking about him and learning about him and the interaction with Pilate. This is not Herod Antipas, this is Herod the Great, the first Herod who is known as Herod. There are four of them in the Bible we could look at, at least.

But the idea of Herod the Great being this really, really bad guy who ends up killing all the children, if you were to go on and look at this in the following passage, this is a terribly insecure, ruthless, suspicious kind of guy. But he's the power that exists in southern Israel. He is the kind of regional king of Rome. Rome had given approval, he was actually from Edom, modern-day Jordan, but he had converted to Judaism, at least as best he could, he poured a ton of money to ingratiate himself to the Jewish people by putting all this money into the temple. We call it Herod's Temple because he underwrote the whole thing. But he was a king who certainly didn't want to hear that there was another king who called himself king of the Jews because that was his title, that's what he liked to be called. And they came asking, "Where is this king of the Jews?"

But let's figure out first of all who they are. Wise men. You see that phrase, wise men in verse 1? "Behold wise men from the east came to Jerusalem." Now, that doesn't help us a lot because if you're going to come to Jerusalem, unless you're coming in ships, you're going to come from the east. I mean everything going to come from that direction... It's not true, I guess. You can come from the south, you know, from Egypt. You can come from boats from the Western world or you can come from the east and there's so much to the east, obviously. And the east is in the east, the Middle East is in the east.

"They come from the east," that doesn't tell us much about where they're from, but the word does, the word that unfortunately in our text gets translated, and I shouldn't say that because I always blame them when they translate it or when they transliterated, they can't win for losing with me, but here they take a word that you know of, it's the word Magi in the Greek New Testament, which actually is a word with Persian roots. You may not be familiar with it even if you are Iranian today and you know Persian, but the idea of that word goes back to ancient pre-Christian era designations of leaders in that nation. The Magi. And we get words into English from that, at least how it's transliterated into our language. Words like magnificent and magician and, you know, magnum, all those words come from it. It just means "great," they're great people.

Great in what way? Obviously, the translation in our text, wise men, they're great in learning, they're professorial, even as we see their interest in the stars, they're astronomers and, more than that, they are astrologers. I mean, I'm not trying to defend them as orthodox, you know, godly people. I mean, they have a god, it's the god Mazda, it's not the car company, but they were Zoroastrian and Zoroastrianism before the time of Christ, their god, Mazda, which your car is named after kind of in a roundabout way, I won't get into that. And I won't judge you for having a Mazda car that reminds me of a pagan god. You can still say, I love my Mazda, it's a great car. Not that anyone says that, I don't know, maybe people do say that. I'm not knocking Mazdas, I just wouldn't buy one and I don't have one. We'll edit that out for radio. OK. What was I talking about?

Zoroastrianism. One of the unique things about Zoroastrianism, at least, is not unique in that it's wrong, it's right, they were monotheists, they believe in one god. And that one god, Mazda, they understood something about the fact that the Jews had a, you know, clearly an agreement with them about monotheism. There is one God, the God of heaven and earth. But you might say, well how in the world were people from the east, this Persian word, coming from Persia. Right? How would they have any interest in the Jewish Messiah? Well the Jewish Messiah was more than the Jewish Messiah if you had any encounter with Hebrew prophets. And guess what? In the east, people who were from the east, from Persia, you had contact with Jewish prophets. Who was the Jewish prophet in the fifth, sixth century who was spending time educating the Persians about the coming Messiah? His name is Daniel. You know him, he came as a prisoner of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 when Nebuchadnezzar came in, the Babylonian king, and destroyed Jerusalem, he brought the best of the best over to Babylon. And when they went to Babylon the guy who rose to the top ranks of the "magicians," if you want to call them that, the great men of learning, the wise men of the kingdom, it was Daniel. Daniel was known as a prophet and he spoke of the Jewish God and the Jewish Messiah who would be the king of the world. He even got Nebuchadnezzar to bow down to the God of the Bible.

Then we had a change in world powers. We went from the Babylonians to the next world power, to the, we call them the Medo-Persians, the Medes and the Persians. And the Medo-Persians, of course, all of those leaders were influenced by Daniel. Daniel talked about, from Daniel Chapter 2, Daniel Chapter 7, Daniel Chapter 9, Daniel Chapter 11, all these passages that speak of the coming one who would be the king of the world. I often talked about Daniel 7, the "One coming like the son of man, from the Ancient of Days, and all authority of all peoples and all nations will come and give their allegiance to him." That was the king of the Jews. The king of the Jews, the king of this God of Daniel, was to be the king of everyone.

And so these astrologers, if you will, these astronomers, really, because they're gazing up at the sky every night and they're the intellects. I mean, we get so much from modern astronomy, if you study

the history of astronomy, back to the Persians. But something appears in the sky. Now, again this is... You don't mind if I just talk here a little bit this morning. "I guess, Pastor Mike, you've got the mike." Okay, then I'll keep talking. And I know it's circuitous, but we'll find our way back. In 2011 I preached a message, I put it on the back, it's message 11 something, 11-37, and I talked about all the theories about this star and I might as well pitch this to you, as though we were talking in your front room, because it is very interesting. In the last couple of years a book has come out and I do think it's a landmark book and it's very helpful and I'm almost fully persuaded and I'm not quite there yet ready to say that with a microphone on my head, but I'm close. I pitched all the theories. There were a lot of theories about what this star was.

Now again, the language shouldn't bother you. Everything in the sky that's not the moon at night is referred to under the rubric of that word, that vocabulary word "star". I talked about a lot of things in terms of what the theories are at the day. And I talked about supernovas, for instance, which was a popular theory, that there was a supernova. There was even one that is dated back to a supernova, the birth of a star, the sprite thing that shines in the sky for, you know, it can be for a long, long time. There was one even back to 5 B.C., which is the right timeframe that we need.

If you heard my sermons before about the timeframe, sometime between 6, 5, or 4 B.C. is the timeframe of Christ's birth. I know they got the dating wrong, that's another sermon, because it came many, many years later. I'm going to get back to something here that relates to Matthew 2, I promise. Kepler, Johannes Kepler, for instance, believed that this was a supernova that was described here. I talked about the theory of comets. Right? Comets having tails, showing up, certainly, if you're in the east and the west, I mean, you would see that as these comets get near the sun, that's when they start to glow and all the rest. I encountered a book by a fellow Moody Bible Institute grad who went on to Cambridge to get his doctorate, and he did a lot of great research. Started as a biblical scholar and he still is, but writing about astronomy and trying to figure this passage out. Actually it was just on a question he got from his father-in-law, but ended up writing this book, which is well researched. I read an astronomer's review of the book who, of course, approached this with a great deal of skepticism, but it is a very powerful book in trying to make the case that this was an actual comet. It really fits all of the Biblical descriptions here. And while I kind of dismissed that, I didn't dismiss it fully but I said I don't have a record, we don't have any reliable record of a comet at that period in the right timeframe. Some have said, maybe his Halley's Comet. Halley's Comet came through, that's true and it was visible. It's visible for a short period of time but not long enough, I think, to meet all the criteria of this text, and it was in 12 B.C., it's the wrong time frame.

So, this book by Colin Nicoll is his name, Colin Nichell, he calls it the "Christ Comet," which is interesting, that's the title the book. He makes a very good case that this may even be in fact what it is. I should've put the book on the back of the worksheet and I'm sorry but you can write it down. Colin Nicholl and the book called "The Christ Comet," at least those are the two keywords in it. He makes the case very persuasively that what this is in every criteria in the text that is given here actually matches. He did a lot of great work, it's well footnoted, its researched, astronomers have vetted this book, it is a good book that is very exciting to maybe come to some conclusions that I think biblical scholars have been really confused about as to what this could possibly be. All of that just to say, I would tell you that if we were sitting in your front room and as long as we're talking, I would say that's worth a little research. But that's not what I'm here to preach on and that would fool you at this point because that's what I've been preaching on for five minutes. But, if you go back and listen to my 2011 sermon, you may say, well he didn't think it was a comet then. I didn't fully dismiss it, I just wasn't sold, at least I think that's how I recall preaching that message.

All right. Can we come back now to this message? "You got the mike, Pastor." OK. Here we go. Herod is one saying, "Here I want to tell you, in answer to your question, I know where he's going to be born," and he quotes, does your Bible not say this in verse 5? It talks about this quotation from the prophet as being Micah 5:2. I want to tell you that everything that we can know about why the Persians have an interest in the king of the Jews is because of biblical prophecy in Daniel. And so, they are relying on their biblical data to go across this desert, which is at least 550, 600 miles and they're at a camel's pace, so that's going to take a month to get there and a month back and however long you're going to stay there. They're going to leave the comforts of their environs, their culture, their world to say, "Hey, Zoroastrian priest, hey, kings of the Mesopotamian region, we're going to go to this Jewish king who Daniel talked about and then we're going to get there and we're going to rely upon biblical data, at least Herod is, to tell them where it is. The biblical prophecies are remarkable as it relates to everything related to Christ's birth.

Of course we talk about that from time to time to show you that within the pages of your Bible is the enduring evidence of God's revelation to man. We have it. His fingerprints are all over it. We don't expect God to do magic tricks for every person in every generation to prove that he's God. But he's given you a book that has supernatural fingerprints all over it given the predictive prophecies in the text. As a matter of fact, and we don't have time for this, but as I often say that never stops me, so let's go to Isaiah 60 real quick. You've lost your sense of humor at this point and I fully understand it. I get it. But turn with me to Isaiah 60 just for a quick second to show you that even them coming was a fulfillment of prophecy, which I'm sure they didn't know. But here it comes. They are doing exactly what the text said. And I say I'm sure, I'm sure with an asterisk. I'm almost positive they would not know that they are walking right into the middle of fulfilling biblical prophecy.

Let's get a little context here, start in verse 1, Isaiah 60. "Arise and shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you," has become part of our hymnology in our day, that line. "For behold," verse 2, "darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples." And if you remember when we were a lot younger and started the book of Luke, in Luke Chapter 1 verse 57, Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, starts quoting this passage and alluding to the fact that there's going to be a dawning of Christ. Christ is going to come and Zachariah's son is going to be the forerunner, John the Baptist, to Jesus. And he's talking about there's light dawning, which speaks even, I think, in the ears of the Persians regarding the star of this one who's coming, back to Balaam's prophecy in Numbers.

But the idea of the rising of the light in Israel, this great revelation of God, and it says it here in verse 2, "The darkness shall cover the earth, and darkness of the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you," not as prophet, not as forerunner, but the Lord himself. So many prophecies about the coming of Christ speak that way. The first person with the word Yahweh. That's why you have a capital O-R-D, LORD, the Lord himself, he's going to come, "and his glory will be seen upon you," upon you, you the land. "And the nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising," great people. Right? The Magi. "Lift up your eyes all around, and see; and gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, young camels." From where? From foreign places like, "Midian and Ephah; and those from Sheba," from down south, "shall come. They shall bring," this is interesting, "gold and frankincense and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord." Now I know this has a lot of

overtones to a lot of things that are going to happen in the kingdom, but I think here's a picture with the exact same two, at least the two of the three, and I think the reason the third one's not there is for reasons I've discussed elsewhere when it talks then about myrrh. But the idea of gold and frankincense, these great priestly, kingly gifts being brought to this land when the Lord's glory shines upon it. Great. Interesting.

All of that to say this. This is a bad homiletics sermon, but you're going to get the point. Here it comes. Number one, when it comes to what they're doing, I think it's a great template for us. Let's just take it a step further. Instead of leaving a geographic location, which I'm not called to do. Right? I mean, I might be. But to follow Christ is not for me to get on a plane and go to Tel Aviv and find Jesus in Israel. What is it? It's for me to step out of my world and go into his world and count myself a follower of Christ. Geographically, they left their place and their home and their comfort and their environment to go to the king of the Jews, which was foreign to them. Foreign to them in terms of culture, foreign to them in terms of geography.

I think you and I, as weird as this may sound, need to say I'm going to sacrifice this Christmas. I'm going to sacrifice my world, whatever I see as what's comfortable and convenient for me and everything that I'm use to in the 21st century American world, I'm going to say whatever it means to step into his world, I am going to give God that. And in a sense it's like Romans 12, I'm coming as a living sacrifice. I myself am giving myself you. I'm stepping out of my world into yours.

Number one, "Sacrifice Your World for His." And I think every Christian has got to come to that conclusion. That's what is called upon for us. We are called to say, "I am yours." We talk about that kid's musical last week. I mean, at the end, and I know it's a cute musical and all that, but the lyrics themselves spoke to the fact, "What can I get a king? Well, here's the thing. I guess I can give him myself?" And what does that mean for us? That means that this Christmas you say I'm ready to fully identify with Christ. I'm ready to say I am Christ's. Why? The same reason they did. Compelled by biblical prophecy. If you really want to boil down why I'm a Christian and why I think many of you are Christians, intellectually speaking, it's because of the compelling, overwhelming veracity of biblical Scripture. The doctrine of knowing that the Scripture is God's Word. Because he has spoken, he has revealed himself in the Word and he's proved it by predictive prophecy and I can research it, I can see it, I can read it, I can figure out when it's written, I can find ancient documents to absolutely verify that it was written before the fulfillment, and I can see, look, God is the only one who sees the end from the beginning, who can call things from before they ever happen, have them written through the prophets, put them on paper and say this is not Nostradamus, this is not Jean Dixon, this is not weird statements that can be applied 18 different ways, to say that this one, this ruler of Israel, is going to come from Bethlehem. I mean, those are the kinds of absolute prophecies that we have in Scripture.

And I'm saying, compelled by biblical Scripture, I'm going to feel the draw to step across the line and say I'm not going to identify myself as an American, I'm not going to identify myself as a person of the world, I'm not going to identify myself as whatever is comfortable for me. I'm going to identify myself, from this point on in my life, as a Christian. I stand with Christ. I'm going to be someone who sees that my world is now behind me and his world is my world. If he wants my world to be in church, I'm in church, if he wants me to read the Bible, I read the Bible, if he wants me to pray, I pray. If I want to be counted as a Christian in this world, I'm going to be counted as a Christian in this world, because I'm compelled and constrained by Scripture. I'm compelled. I don't think there's any other way for me to look at Scripture and say, "Well, you know what, maybe he's not the king." He's the king. And it's hard, I understand, because he doesn't look like a king there in a house as a

baby, as an 18-month-old kid. And you know what? To the world he doesn't look much like a king now. Right? We're talking about an invisible Jesus who we can't see looking back at history, and then looking at promises that he's going to come back again. It is hard for people to see why in the world I would no longer count myself just a regular part of this world, but I've stepped out into this subculture, this increasingly maligned subculture, this embattled and belittled subculture, to say I am a Christian. I'm a Christian, I stand with Christ, and I am in his world now. I've left my world behind.

The Bible is very clear about what this looks like when it comes to what the Bible has to say regarding giving up my life. It couldn't be said any more clearly than Luke Chapter 14 verse 33. He says that anyone would come after me, he's got to give up all of his possessions, give up everything, and follow me. I mean, that is a sense of identity. I am no longer my own. Matter of fact, he says that to the Corinthians, you've been bought with a price, you are no longer your own, you're mine.

Here's a passage to jot down that might be helpful and inspirational. First Peter Chapter 2. First Peter 2 verses 9 through 12, let me just read this really slowly, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood," you're mine, "a holy," set apart "nation, you're a people for God's own possession." Why? Because he wants you to go and "proclaim the excellency of him who called you," I love this, here's the motif, "out of darkness and into his marvelous light. For once you were not a people," you were out there on your own just like everyone else, "but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy," you had your sin and it was still on you. You were going to be punished for your sin one day because you were a sinner and God is just, "but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles," you don't really belong here anymore, "to abstain from the passions of the flesh," I'm not going to live like everyone else, "they wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable," live for this king, "so that when they speak against you as evildoers they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of his visitation." I live between the first coming and the second coming and between these two, I'm going to say, I will be counted in his world. I'll be counted part of his people. I will stand with Christ.

Let me drill down another level. Look at verse 7 back in Matthew Chapter 2. It's printed on your worksheet there, verse 7, "Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertain from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.'" Now we know from the warning in verse 12 and we know from what follows after that, that he is going to kill all the children in Bethlehem and its environs, which by the way, I know that the critic of the Bible is going to say, "We have no biblical, extra-biblical information about this," in part because this village, demographically at the time of Christ, which was so unique as to why this great ruler would come from this little village. I mean, though it was the birthplace of David, it was still a little village. Demographers would say at the time of Christ, probably in that range, male children, from 0 to 2-years-old, probably constituted maybe 20, 25, 30, maybe at most 40 children. Now again, it's still devastating if, you know, one of them is your kid, but I don't think this made a lot of headlines. Why? Because Herod was killing all kinds of people. Herod, near the end of his reign, he killed his wife. Right? Which you may say, well a lot of people want to kill their wives. Well, he killed his wife because he was afraid she was going to take over and then he killed three of his own sons. Now that's unique, that's going to make the papers. It would probably make the papers if you killed your wife.

But that's a big deal. Why? All because he was threatened that they might take over his kingdom. He was such an insecure person that he said, "On the day that I die he commanded his officials take

a well-favored, loving general, a leader in my kingdom and have him executed on the day that I die so that I make sure everyone cries a lot at my funeral." That's the kind of guy he was. Terrible. And this Herod, this horrible guy, who got worse as he went on, as Josephus says, he goes out and kills all these children. This was the guy who was in charge of the world. I mean, he in charge of the ancient world of Israel, at least. And look down at verse 12. After they say, well here's when it happened, he said, "Hey, I'm going to come and worship." He didn't want to worship. He wanted to kill him.

So they go out and they find Jesus in the home, we'll look at that in a second, but in verse 12 it says, "They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they departed to their own country by another way." If I'm going to look at biblical prophecy, which is all based on something that is very hard to verify, at least in terms of it doesn't look like it now, but it seems to have matched God's calling in the past and he's going to do things he's promised in the future, but right now, I got either obeying Herod or obeying the Scripture. In this case, I'm going to recognize, and God was gracious to show them Herod doesn't have good intentions here in that dream, I've got a tough choice to make. Am I going to stay in favor with the powers that be in my culture, or am I going to be willing to find my solidarity and alliance with this Christ of Scripture? That decision was a very risky one and it was one that they were willing to make. They were willing to, let's put it this way, and I think we should do the same, they were willing to, I've used this phrase before, "Sacrifice Popularity for Solidarity." They wanted solidarity with the Christ of the Bible and they were willing to give up popularity with the powers of the world.

Go on a secular talk show. I don't know, maybe your industry would become so, you know, noted and famed that you're going to come on a talk show. Like this Christian artist who just went on, this up and coming Christian artist, and they were just asked about a simple question about homosexuality. They were asked the question and they completely folded. Right? "Who am I to know. I don't know." Well, this is the kind of pressure we will increasingly get from the powers that be, whether they hold microphones in talk shows, or whether or not they're on stages receiving awards for their movies, or whether they're artists on stages at rock concerts, the elite athletes of our day, you want to go and be accepted by the world powers. Right? I know we don't have Herod, but we've got political leaders, we've got business leaders, we've got entertainment leaders, we've got athletic leaders, we've got musicians, all of these people who are admired who will get all the awards and make all the money, who are on the headlines of all the magazines. You want to go and get their applause? I guarantee you, you're going to have to break ranks with solidarity with Christ. You cannot stay in step with Christ and get the popularity and adulation of the world. You just can't. You've got to choose between popularity or solidarity. That's your choice. You can't have both. There's just no way.

And increasingly in our day, maybe in the 1950s you could have had a better ratio of, "Yeah, I guess they still like me here, but I'm still faithful to Christ." That is going away. The bifurcation of the world saying we will not tolerate you for standing up for biblical truth, the exclusivity of the Gospel, the biblical ethics, whether it's your sex life or any other part of your life, you're going to have to say I'm going to go with solidarity with Christ. And I'm just saying that's a good thing to do. And here's why, because I'd much rather have friendship with God than friendship with the world. Why? Because really, there is nothing that they have to offer me. In the end, nothing. Temporary adulation, temporary fame, temporary applause. Sure, I can have the world like me. Matter of fact, I can be a very popular pastor this afternoon before dinner, I could get really, really popular. I'll just go post some things that clearly deny what God has said. I can make myself known for saying, now I'm going to step in line with the world. And you don't think I'd be more popular than this little

band. I could have the world's applause, today I could. All I can do is break ranks with God and his Word. That's all I have to do.

But I've got to say, like you have to say, whether I'm at work, whether I'm in my industry, whether I'm in my family at my table at a Christmas celebration, I'm not going to stick my finger in people's eyes, I'm not going to necessarily cause conflict, but if push comes to shove, I stand with Christ. I don't stand with people who want me to believe what they believe. I just can't. I have to believe what God says. I have to stay in fellowship with God. And is that a good thing? That's a great thing. I mean really it's a great thing.

I would much rather trade the world's applause, who in the end doesn't really care about me, for the God who can care for me. Think about that. Psalm 23, David talks about God being a shepherd. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Now there are a lot of things he wants, even in that psalm he goes on to say, "I'm surrounded by enemies." "Well, what I want is I want my God to slaughter my enemies." God did not slaughter David's enemies. Not at first at least, when he wrote this psalm he's running around as a fugitive. But he said, "You know what I have even though I don't have popularity with Saul, the king in Israel, I got God as my shepherd. I have Christ," in the New Testament perspective. John 10. He says, "I am the Good Shepherd. Follow me." You can have favor with Christ. It may mean you're out of step with the world but that's OK. And when the powers that be, like Herod in verse 12, when he finds out that these guys have gone out another way and didn't pass through Jerusalem again, you don't think he was mad? You don't think he sent people after the Magi? I'm sure this was very risky and probably caused a lot of trouble for them and a lot of sleepless nights trying to figure out how in the world they were not going to be tracked down, trying to get to the desert, get back to Mesopotamia, before Herod's men get to them. But they were willing to do it, as you should be and I should be.

In other words, I want to go to Christ this Christmas and say this: I'm willing to sacrifice whatever popularity just to be faithful to Christ. I want to be counted with Christ. Why? Because, "The Lord will be my shepherd, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'm going to fear no evil because you are with me." Now you can't say that about a person who is compromising, who wants a foot in the world and a foot in the church. I want a foot out here in the world and I want a foot here with God. You just can't have it. You cannot say God is my shepherd, he's my friend. Friendship with the world means hostility toward God. That's what James Chapter 4 says, I've got to make a choice. I'm going to give to God this Christmas, "Hey, I'm totally loyal, I'm yours, even if it costs me."

That's a hard gift to give, at least on the surface, but what we get back in return is unrivalled, unprecedented. Let me quote for you Psalm 46. I could quote the rest of Psalm 23, which is very, very encouraging, but let me read Psalm 46, at least the first seven verses. "God is our refuge and our strength, he's a very present help in time of trouble." He doesn't always calm the sea but he's going to calm me. "Therefore, I'm not going to fear even if the earth gives away, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam, the mountains tremble at its swelling," I'm not going to be afraid. "There's a river whose streams," I know this is the poetry and music, lyrics to music, "it makes glad the city of God."

I have something, I have this, as Jesus put this, river of life within me springing up. I'm OK, even if it's bad out there, even if Herod hates me, even if my family doesn't understand me, even in my work they think I'm a Jesus freak, it doesn't matter. "There's a river whose streams make glad the city of God, a holy habitation," where God lives. "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be

moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations may rage, the kingdoms will totter," but God, "at his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." That's a great passage. Here are a great set of verses to remember. If you feel like, you know what, to stand faithfully with Christ this Christmas is going to put me at odds with people in my life who I don't want to be at odds with, welcome to the club. But Jesus said, "You get me," and I'd much rather have him, I'd much rather have his approval than the world's approval.

One passage, I've got to turn you to this one. One of my favorite passages in all the New Testament, Hebrews Chapter 11 verse 13. Verses 13 through 16. I'm sure there are people, by the way, in your life, are there not, that you'd much rather be in favor with, even if everyone else is not in favor with you for being in favor with them. I'll bet you've got people, I mean family members, I would hope, you'd say, "I'd much rather have my family member in this situation, be my ally, than to have all the people in his office, all the people at her work, all the people in our neighborhood, even if it costs me, because I love them. I mean all of this is not a sacrifice if we can to get that ingredient back in it.

Hebrews 11, take a look at this. Verse 13. "These all died," and if you look back in the passage, all the way back to verse 8, we got Abraham. In verse 9 we've got Jacob and Isaac. All of that. These guys, it says they died, "not receiving the things that they were promised." When it comes to the Promised Land, Canaan, they didn't get there. "But having seen them from afar," now here's the double entendre of us looking forward to the coming king, this little baby Jesus is going to grow up to be the king of the world and these kings of Persia were ready to say, "We submit to him. We worship him. We credit him with the credit that's due him." "Having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles in the earth." And so it will be for us. He says, "For people who speak thus make it clear they're seeking a homeland." We do want to be at home, but it won't be here. "If they'd been thinking of that land from which they had gone out," Right? In their case they could have turned around and gone back. They would have returned. "They had opportunity to return. But as it is," verse 16, "they desire a better country." I love this. I mean, the application to our life. We want a better country. "That is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed," this is one of my favorite verses, "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

I'd love to say when God thinks of me, "I'm not ashamed that Mike's one of mine. He's mine. I love the fact that he is faithful and loyal to me." Why? "Because he's willing to be seen as a stranger," verse 13, "and an exile on this earth." I'm just ready to sacrifice popularity with people who don't care about me anyway, to be in solidarity with one who's willing to be my shepherd, who will walk me through the ups and downs of life, who says that even though we've got all these bad things happening. Right? Enemies surrounding me, "he sets the table before me in the presence of my enemies." "Surely goodness and mercy, they are going to chase me down," and I know when they're ultimately going to overtake me, "Because I'm going to live in the house of the Lord forever." That is the kind of thing that makes all the difference in the world. I'd much rather stand with Christ than have the world applaud. That's a good place for us to start this Christmas, verses 1 through 6, to say, "God here I am, I'm in your world. Verses 7 through 10 and verse 12 to remember, "You know what, I'm going to be loyal to you. I'm going to be in solidarity and alliance with you even if it costs me relationship with others."

And then lastly, let's just look real quickly at verse 11 of Matthew 2, they give gifts. "And going into the house they saw the child and Mary his mother, and they fell down and they worshiped him." Worship, by the way, let me just say this real quick, is to "ascribe to the Lord the glory due

his name," is a great Old Testament definition of the word worship. "To ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name." You've got to unpack that, "to ascribe," to credit, to agree, to say yes, you deserve, what? The Lord what? "Glory." It's a hard biblical word. It's the idea of the weight, "kabod," in Hebrew of the Old Testament, means the gravitas, the importance, the dignity. "To ascribe or to credit to God the importance that is due him." That's what they did. And when we do that and we say he is the most important person in the world, soon as I get a sense from Scripture or, in our case, the indwelling of God's Spirit that says, you know what, the king wants this, absolutely. The king would like this, absolutely. The king wants you to do this. I'm there. The king in his Word is directing you to live this kind of way or to do that kind of thing. It's like, absolutely, he's the king. Anything I have then, as I already quoted in Luke Chapter 14 verse 33, it's his.

I doubt anyone here is going to have the experience of Christ being very clear in saying, "Hey, if you're going to come after me then sell all your possessions, give it away, come follow me," like he did in Matthew 19 to the rich young ruler. But you know, if he does say that to any part of my life or to all of my life, it's okay because at the beginning of my Christian life I said, "He is the king. I'm ready to give up anything." Here's a definition of something you won't give up for God. Are you ready? There's a word for it. I-D-O-L. Idol is something I will not give up for God. That's just a definition of an idol.

And you look at the things that they gave away in their gifts. I mean, certainly the first one, gold. We can get into all the details of the differences between these and what they all meant and how interesting it was and how poetic it was and how prophetic it was. But just starting with the idea of things that are valuable. Gold. It's still something people will not give up for God, like the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 who walked away and said, "I won't give up everything." So you love money more than you love me. That's where idolatry is defined. And it always starts in our heart. I want to make sure that in my mind I'm willing to say anything that the Lord would want from me, in detail and specifics, whatever it might be, I'm ready to give it up. Palms down, let it go. Whatever you need from me. You need more time? Great, I'll give you more time. You need more attention, more effort, more whatever, you need to give something up, here it is, I'll give it up.

There are a lot of people in this room I'm sure that are struggling, as Ezekiel 14 put it, with idols of the heart. They will not let some things go. And all I'm saying is when you trade those things and you say, "God, I'm ready to give these up, whatever you want to take, take it. Whatever you want to move, move it. Whatever you want to change, change it. That kind of willingness and openness. We call it ATAPAT around here: Any Thing, Any Place, Any Time. What you get in return, I mean, there's no comparison. You cannot out give God when it comes to these kinds of things. If you're willing to let go of some things that ultimately grip your heart, you don't own them, they often own you, and you let it go. I mean, sometimes God just can't even give you what you need until you're ready to let go of what you so badly want. Just let it go. I mean, you all of a sudden realize what you're trading these idols for is real treasure, real treasure. As Jesus said, treasure that out surpasses, outstrips and will, in terms of significance and satisfaction and fulfillment, it'll outperform anything this world could provide for you.

Number three, I just put it that way, you need to this Christmas, "Sacrifice Idols for Real Treasure." The real treasure may be hard for you to figure out in terms of. "How is this treasure for me going without this thing? I wanted this job. I mean, I had a job lined up when I was young, I wanted it, I had offers, I was ready to go. And God got involved and I said to God any thing, any place, any time and, I'll tell you what, I had to say to that dream and that job, 'No, I won't do it.' And I gave it up for God." But as you recognize, and all of us can come up to the microphone and talk about it -



really, I would never go back and exchange that. Never. My heart's desire, giving that up, in that particular area of my life, really was the opening for God to give me what I really needed, which in the end, I would value more than anything I could have ever dreamed I wanted in some other path of life. That's the kind of God that we have and the Scriptures are so clear about it.

Jot this reference down, we don't have time to turn there, but First Timothy Chapter 6 verses 17 through 19. If you're going to your small groups, this is a great passage. I think I actually wrote it on the back of your worksheet. Verse 19 talks about the fact when we can hold loosely the gold, frankincense and myrrh of this world, and whenever God needs it or asks for it, we're ready palms down to give it up, "We will take hold," I love this last phrase, "of that which is truly life." That which is truly life. A firm foundation for the future and take hold of that which is truly life.

I sold a house and went a lot of years without being able to afford a house here in Southern California, as you know, it's very hard. Finally got into a house, it was ten years in a condo trying to build up some equity, and I finally was able to sell that. And then I got into a real house and it happened to be when the market was moving up. And so the market did well, this house did well, and Southern California real estate, sometimes you do really well coming out of a house like that, and I came out and I had a decent amount of money. I mean, for me it was a huge amount of money. It was like wow, that's amazing. And then we were about to start Compass Bible Church and it was like, well, I don't really know, it's not time for me to buy a house. So I took that check and I remember looking at that check, the biggest check I'd ever had with my name on it. And I went to the bank and I said, "Here." And it was such a weird experience.

Now this is an earthly illustration, but what that did on an earthly level for me, as I went and then signed a lease at a little tiny apartment and moved my family into it, I thought, you know, I may be living in this apartment but I know just down the street in that bank there is a big number in that bank account that came from the sale of that property. And I know I'm going to have a house. I mean, that's the plan at least. And one day I'll take that money and I'll parlay that into a new house. But right now, whatever, parking in parking slots with numbers painted on the ground, a little apartment, I put my kids in a closet, you know. All these things I was trying to do just to make it. But every day I could say, from an earthly perspective, I've got a lot of money in the bank right now. It was burning a hole in my pocket too for that whole year.

I was like, I'm going to invest that in something in the future. I had laid a firm foundation for the future, earthly illustration, humanly speaking, that made me feel pretty good about even the deprivation I was feeling. Even the fact that I didn't have a house that I wanted, even when I went over to your house and I saw how great your house was. You know what, it's all right. I got a big check in the bank. And one day I'm going to use that as a big down payment for a house and I'm going to be able to move my family into a normal house, and that will be great. You know we give up a lot of things right now. And we can feel like, well, we're doing without. But Jesus said, if you would just store up treasure in heaven, you would have that experience that First Timothy 6 talks about of laying up a firm foundation for the future.

There isn't one thing that Christ could ask me for, there's not a single thing, including the closest relationships I have. If God would want to take those from me there's no doubt in my mind that every deprivation, every sacrifice of anything that was important to me, God says, "Don't worry, you can't even give up a cup of cold water for me and not lose your reward." And that's really the thing I want to leave you with. If you love Christ, and I hope we understand his love because if we understand his love we will start to love because he first loved us. You'll recognize it wouldn't



matter if it's everything I have and it seems small, like the kids musical last week when they're giving their dolly and they're given their abacus, their 8+ abacus, if you caught that little joke, you know, you'd thinking and it seems so silly and seems so insignificant. Or if you were giving, you know, massive amounts of money to Christ, bringing down big bars of gold and frankincense and myrrh from Persia, it wouldn't matter. Right?

You would say, with Isaac Watts back in 1707 when he wrote that hymn, "When I survey the wondrous cross," and you should think about the entirety of his life when I survey the Bethlehem stable and this house in Bethlehem, and then the cross itself. When I survey that, the last line says, "Were the whole realm of nature mine," even if I owned everything, "That would be a present far too small; Because love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul and my life and my all," and no one gives that grudgingly when they understand the love of Christ.

We're going to celebrate the Lord's birth this week. Right? In to next week I guess. We are going to come and, I think, you like me, you're going to try and buy presents because that's the tradition for your friends trying to pick out... The present I want to bring to Christ, if you look at this, I want to bring him myself, I want to bring him my loyalty, I want to bring him my generosity. Whatever you want, I'll stay loyal, I'm living in your world. I mean that's the essence of what I just tried to preach here this morning. And all I'm saying is it's going to be overshadowed, motivated first of all by your love for this God, I hope, that makes it seems that this is no sacrifice at all. But even if you feel the sacrifice, you get his world, you get solidarity, shepherding of God himself, and something he calls real treasure that you're going to take hold of when you step across the threshold of this life, no one is going to regret a single generous sacrifice that we give to Christ, whether it's in social circles because of our solidarity with him, or whether it's something he asked me to give or change. Give it up. Do it for the Lord. You'll never regret it.

Let's pray. God, help us as we start our Christmas season here. Thinking about wise men, the most unlikely cadre of men from the east that you would think would have no interest in traveling 600 miles across the desert for a full month, following what, perhaps, may be that comet that appeared and pointed right down to the place where this child was in that house, making very clear, because biblical prophecy had been fulfilled twice, three, four, five times over, I'm sure to these Magi knowing that this was the Christ child that the Bible talked about, the Nebuchadnezzar, the predecessor of the Persian Empire, understood to be the king of kings and Lord of Lords. That one day his kingdom would arrive and his power would be exercised to be able to exert the kind of leadership over the whole world that you'd want to be on the right side of. That would allow those Magi, however many there were with those three gifts represented in that passage, would be willing to even defy Herod and disobey him and not even do what he asked them to do. They weren't worried about being out of step with the powers of their culture.

Help us God as we're just dealing with mostly insults and being belittled or being excluded. It's so small compared to what our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world have put up with. But let us stand strong this Christmas, not as argumentative people, but people who are willing to say, "God, I'm yours. I'm stepping into your world. I recognize that what you really need for me is loyalty. You want me to be loyal to you, to stand with you even if it cost me popularity. And then God anything you want to change my life, anything you want to take or move, I'm willing to do that." God give us that kind of open-handedness toward you that you might be pleased with our gifts just like we would if our kids brought us a gift. No matter what the price was, whatever their capacity was, knowing that it was brought lovingly and thankfully. It was brought because we recognize that there's no repaying the love of Christ on our behalf. Let us celebrate Christ this



Christmas giving ourselves, our loyalty and our generosity to him.

In Jesus name. Amen.