

Christmas Presents
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Prov 17:8

(BHS)

אָבֹן־חֵן הַשָּׂחָד
בְּעֵינַי בְּעֵלָיו
אֶל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יִפְנֶה יִשְׁקֵיל:

(NKJV)

A **present** is a precious stone
in the eyes of its possessor;
Wherever he turns, he prospers.

“Stone-of-*hēn* (grace, favor).” NLT glosses “lucky charm” and RSV, “magic stone.” The *shachad* (hard ch as in “chaos”) is a present, a gift. Line 2 is straightforward, but notice “possessor” is *ba’al*, as in the deity. The word means lord or master.

Some Christmases ago I spoke with a friend on the phone, who was sitting in the middle of her living room floor surrounded with boxes of presents to wrap and mail. She said, “George, I am sending these gifts, but not with a good attitude! I am bitter and resentful. My mom says I have a wrong spirit about the whole thing.” She told me about a previous year with these relatives, who told her later to her face, “All the gifts you sent we never used. They’ve been in the closet since we got them.” It is no wonder after that that her attitude was poor.

Another man wanted to send money to several relatives and stated an amount with a question, “Do you think that’s too cheap?” You know, how little can I get away with before they think poorly of me? Christmas presents—why do we give them anyway?

This reminds me of a phenomenon in the book of Proverbs. The words for “gift” and “bribe” are the same, and scholars are divided as to whether in any

particular proverb the word is used positively (“gift”) or negatively (“bribe”). It’s my belief that it denotes a bribe in every case: gifts always are calculated to gain advantage in Proverbs.

I’ll tell you how Christmas works with me. We operate on a family budget and as long as we stay within the budget I am cheerful. But around Christmas time, we invariably bust the budget, and then I start getting grouchy. This year is different; I think I’m in shock and reality won’t set in until I get the credit card bill. Anyway, the more we spend, the more gifts begin to morph in my heart from being freely given to begrudgingly compelled.

I suppose all of us can relate to these feelings. Haven’t you at one time or other nursed bitterness about gift-giving or resented the cost when there was no benefit to you? Of course, Jesus said that even evil people know how to give gifts to their own kids. But except for that, I submit that it is not in your nature to cheerfully give—especially to people who don’t appreciate you or your gifts, who will leave them in the bottom of the closet. A gift, says the proverb, opens doors and brings benefit to the giver. That we understand. That we can fully endorse. Even at Christmas, it is hard to get out of the self-promoting mindset of proverbial gifting.

Yet we are Christians who believe that God isn’t like that. Our own human nature which is so easily put out by obnoxious relatives or ingratitude or because we aren’t appreciated or because of the money—as I said, our own human nature—stands in stark contrast to the character of the God who gives freely and at great cost to himself. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16); and “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet

sinner Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Even though we offended him, he gifted us with Christ.

You see, according to the Bible, you are the nuisance. You are the relative that God finds offensive. You are the ungrateful family member that takes his Spirit, which he freely gives, and puts him in the closet because you prefer your jealousy or your grudge or your pleasure. In fact, some reading this right now may have taken Jesus and put him out of sight too, caring little for God’s Christmas gift.

We Christians celebrate Christmas to remember how God gave to those he found offensive, at great cost to himself—and we instinctively know that as we meditate upon the Father giving his Son on the first Christmas, we also will become more like him (so we exchange gifts!). His givingness, his self-sacrificing character, is renewed in us as we remember the one who “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Cor 8:9). We also remember his willingness to die on the cross for us, which is the ultimate gift.

It is in that spirit that we celebrate Christmas. Amen!