

The Pizza Oven and the Baby Jesus – Luke 2:1-20

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What do you think of Christmas shopping? Are you a fan of it?

Some of us find great joy in shopping for gifts for family and friends. It's life-giving. To know of a family member's interests and needs, and to then grace them with a gift that speaks to them in such a way, brings great satisfaction.

Others of us find shopping to have the opposite effect. It's not life-giving but exhausting. And that's not because we don't care about loved ones and want to give them a gift. It's just that shopping isn't our cup of tea. Plus, determining what to get seems like an impossible challenge.

One of the best gifts I've ever received came from my parents probably fifteen years or so ago. It was the Presto Pizzazz Rotating Pizza Oven.

This thing has been and is still a miracle worker. The Holy Spirit has provided a way to serve appetizing, hot food in minutes to adolescent boys and now teenage boys. You put your pizza on the rotating turn-table (frozen Red Baron pepperoni or meat lovers in our case), turn the timer to 20 minutes, plug it in, and soon you're eating delicious, piping-hot pizza.

"What do you want for dinner, boys? Baked chicken with rice and steamed broccoli? (Meh) Homemade chicken enchiladas? (Meh) Pizza on the pizza maker? YES!"

That pizza maker is one of the best gifts ever. Not because it's pretty, not because it reminds us of Jesus, and not because it reeks of sentimentality. It's awesome because it's practical, and that practicality demands a response.

You have to use the pizza maker to enjoy it. You have to get it out of the cupboard, you have to connect the rotating table to the rotator, you have to plug it in, and you have to take the pizza off it when it's done, and you have to slice it afterward.

The gift demands a response for the gift to be meaningful.

The gift of God becoming one of us in Jesus also requires a response. We didn't earn the gift, we didn't check off a series of boxes in order for it to be delivered to us thousands of years ago in the manger at Bethlehem. He just came. It was the most extreme act of grace ever.

Speaking of grace, this is what pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Webber once wrote about it:

There is a reason I am obsessed with grace. There is a reason I've spoken and written and preached about it more than any other thing, and here it is: because everything else in this bankrupt world feels like it's about worthiness....

Everything that is not rooted in grace that I have been offered in life — be it from social media or the wellness industry or higher education or religion feels like it's all about just trying harder. But I've tried trying harder and it doesn't make me free — it just makes me tired. ...

We are imprisoned in the human worthiness competition extravaganza. In other words, perhaps we still lay in sin and error pining. ...

What qualifies us for God's grace isn't our goodness. What qualifies us for God's grace is nothing more than our need for God's grace.

Out of God's great love for us, this gift of grace has been given. And we should do something with it.

What is that? What is the response we can muster. Like the pizza maker, the gift of the incarnation is practical. It's not a gift to be left in the box, so to speak. We shouldn't leave Jesus in the manger.

Instead, out of respect to the giver, we should do something with this very practical gift of heavenly love.

Oh boy, though, what is that? What could we do with such a gift? And why is the baby Jesus a gift we would consider practical?

Well, let's state the obvious. God coming in the form of a human indicates God's desire to be in relationship with us—to forgive, to empathize, to rescue, and to save. Jesus came to give life to us and to redeem us.

And so we have to do something with this gift. We can't just sit on our hands and admire it from afar, like a beautiful shiny ornament on the Christmas tree.

The gift of Jesus demands a response: open the gift and put it to good use.

But, how?

Simple: live in appreciation for it. And embody the virtues this child brought to the world—love, inclusion, and sacrifice. And that's when this gift of Jesus given to us becomes a gift we give to others.

Author and researcher Seth Kaplan has some advice for Americans on how to address the country's most vexing problems.

Get to know your neighbors. Then get to work making the community you live in better for everyone.

The author of the book *Fragile Neighborhoods: Repairing American Society, One Zip Code at a Time*, Kaplan said in an interview, "Look for something close to home that you can do. You have to think of real people and real places and how you contribute to them."

While politics and advocacy matter, he thinks too many Americans neglect the community right outside their door—to their detriment and the detriment of their neighbors.

"It's American society that is in trouble," he says, "from gun violence in Baltimore to teens committing suicide in Palo Alto to the opioid crisis in Appalachia. Our families and communities suffer from social problems that shock the rest of the world, and ought to shock us: family disintegration, homelessness, school shootings, racial animosity, skyrocketing rates of loneliness and depression, and deaths of despair—alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide."

Addressing the country's social woes, Kaplan argues, must involve rebuilding the country's neighborhoods and social capital.

Seeing neighbors, including them, and serving them is how we respond to the gift given to us in Jesus Christ. It's a gift given to us that we have no choice but to do something with.

The gift of Jesus is such a practical gift. Who would've thought he and the Presto Pizzazz Pizza Oven have so much in common? Enjoy it, and put it to good use.