

December 2, 2012 - 11:00 a.m.

Pastor Jonathan Falwell

Tis Better to Give

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:15-16

Summary: Expounding on 1 Peter 3:15-16, Pastor Jonathan talks about the importance of giving, and especially the gift of salvation given to the world at Christmas.

The message that we've heard, "A Strange Way to Save the World," it really, really is. When you think of the manger, when you think of what God did, in John 3:16, that He loved the world so much that He sent his only begotten Son, that He came literally to die on the cross so that we, by believing can have life in His name, that we could spend eternity with Him, that is a pretty amazing thought. It's a pretty amazing thing to realize and understand that God, in all of His, power—and we know that God is all-powerful, we know that He is all-knowing, we know that He is all-loving—is capable of anything. And it's amazing that God chose this way, through a little baby being born in a manger, to save the world.

Think about it. God, you are the God of all the universe, everything that is, is in your hands, you own everything—the cattle on a thousand hills—and really? You send your Son Jesus to be born in a manger? To be born not even in a room but out in the field? God, really, you think that the way to save the world is by sending your Son, and then not only to be born in that manger, but then 33 years later to be cruelly nailed to a tree, to suffer like that, to die like that, to be placed in a borrowed tomb, that the world would condemn Him, that the world would make fun of Him, that the world would ridicule Him, God, really? That's your plan? God, couldn't you have come up with a better way?

But you know God chose that way because He did something through those acts that goes beyond anything that we can imagine to give us a gift that we never could have figured out on our own. We live in a world today where we talk about salvation, we talk about forgiveness, we talk about hope, and man, we come up with all kinds of plans. We want to have hope, so we've got to have money in the bank. We want to have forgiveness, so we have to be nice to other people. We want to live in joy, so we've got to have all the stuff that this world has to offer. You see, if it was left up to man, in our plan, we never could have come up with a plan like His.

Oh, but God knew so much more and so much better than we do, because God knew that the only hope, the only way to truly change the world is through a baby that was born in a manger; an act that started in the manger, but ended with the cross, and oh thank God it ended with the empty tomb. The fact that today that tomb is still empty and that we celebrate the season, the season of giving, the season of receiving gifts, the season that we talk about and listen to the music and we see the lights and we celebrate this joyous time of year.

And we as Christians have a lot to celebrate. We have a lot to rejoice in. Have you ever thought about this: Literally pretty much the entire world celebrates the same holiday that we do. Literally the world celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, even if they don't know it. Now certainly there are some groups out there that don't, and there are groups that have come up with other holidays that fall in the same line with Christmas and use those instead of Christmas, but by and large, as evidenced by, as you walk through the stores, the decorations; as evidenced by the commercials and evidenced by the songs that we hear on all of the radio stations, literally most of the world celebrates the exact same holiday. They celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in Christmas. Isn't that something to be excited about? It's a joy. It's something to celebrate.

But with that good news there is also bad news. You see, there's always bad news that comes along with the good news. The bad news is that even though they celebrate the same holiday, even though they celebrate the birth of Christ like we do, they celebrate it for a totally different reason. They don't celebrate the hope that it gives; they don't celebrate the salvation that it brings; they don't celebrate the redemption that is found in it; they don't celebrate what Jesus did. They celebrate it because of what it does for them. Because everybody likes getting gifts, don't we? We all enjoy that.

As a kid, man, I'm telling you Christmas was the only day of the year that no one had to wake me up. I went to school 180 days a year and I can tell you that my mom, to get me out of bed in the morning to go to school usually required a loud sound and a baseball bat. My kids, it's the exact same thing except I'm getting ready to move from a baseball bat to a shotgun because of how difficult it is to wake them up in the morning for school—some of them, anyway. That is the truth of it.

But on Christmas morning you've got to hold the doors to keep them from coming down, don't you? As parents, we want everything perfect for Christmas. I think with my four children, as they were much younger, they were getting up so early, we hadn't had everything yet and my parents would come over and celebrate with us and be with us at the house when the kids came downstairs and opened their gifts. And one tradition we do is that we don't have all of our gifts wrapped. We have some of our gifts just sitting out in a display, and we had to at times lock them in a room until everything was ready for Christmas morning. And they hated it. They still hate it. I've got pictures going back from when Jonathan was about 3 years old, when he really understood what was happening, all the way through to a couple of years ago, pictures of all four of my kids sitting by the window looking out the window, waiting for my parents to arrive so they could come into the room. It was tradition. Our traditional Christmas picture was the back of our kids' heads looking out the window. Because they were so excited.

We all love getting gifts, but at this season, what I want to talk about today and the next couple of weeks, it is far better to give than to receive. And we live in a world today that is in such desperate need to receive, and we the church, we the people of Christ, we the people who claim Christ as our Lord and Savior, it's up to us to give it to them. So today what I want you to do is turn with me to look at 1 Peter 3, verses 15 and 16, a passage that is kind of a framework not only for the next few moments and next few weeks, but a framework for the entire next year.

In 2013, as your pastor, one thing that God has really placed on my heart and we as a staff and team, we've been meeting, and one thing that is burdening my heart is the individuals and families in our church. And for 2013, I'm telling you, everything that we're going to be doing, we've got some things to share with you and announce to you in the next couple of weeks that we're going to do that I promise you is awesome, incredible. Our team has been working on this.

We are going to focus everything we have in 2013, yes, absolutely on the Great Commission and reaching the world, but on preparing the people of our church, the families of our church, to truly live for Christ, to truly understand what it means to be a child of the king. We are going to be talking about strengthening our families. The greatest danger, the greatest deficit in the church today is not money; it is not time; it is not the attacks from the world. The greatest deficit, the greatest challenge that the church has today is in the people who are part of the church. It's in the strengthening of the individuals, the families, making sure that they are passionate about the Word of God. That's why we talk about the Word of God so much.

Passionate about prayer. If we are going to change the world, we've got to be people who pray, prayer warriors. I want this church full of prayer warriors. I want this church so focused on those kinds of things, so in 2013 we are going to talk about what we can do to strengthen our walk with Christ and to strengthen our families. And not only that, but also to make disciples. Not only to help people to come to know Christ, but to help them grow, to be discipled in what it means to be a child of God. Sometimes we focus so much on reaching the world and changing the world and making disciples of all the nations, sometimes we forget to make disciples in our own family. We have got to stop that.

And the third thing we're going to focus on is impact, teaching all of us, me included, how we can greater impact our community and our world with the Gospel. And it goes beyond, much more beyond, just being part of a church or talking about missions or witnessing. It goes beyond all of that to the point of realizing and understanding that God has a plan and a purpose for each one of us in this room, and I don't care if you're 4 years old or 5 years old or if you are 105 years old; God has a plan to use you to evangelize the world.

A lady over at Lynchburg Health and Rehab celebrated her 100th birthday on Monday, and I was there to celebrate her birthday with her. That was awesome to do that. You know what? God has a plan for her to evangelize and minister, even at her age. God has a plan for all of us.

So today, 1 Peter 3:15-16, I want to read this passage with you and then share with you a couple of quick thoughts from this passage to help us understand what it means to be truly givers. It says in verse 15, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed."

The New Living Translation says it this way, "Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But you must do this in a gentle and a respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live." I want you to catch

these last few words, because it's the most important part, I think, of this verse, "Because you belong to Christ."

I want us as a people and us as a church to truly understand what it means that we belong to Christ. Not that we just call ourselves Christians; not that we just simply attend a church; not that we are involved in worship; not just that we are involved in life groups; not just that we are involved in ministry, but that we truly get it, we understand, we have a vision for and are focused on what it means to belong to Christ. That we are a possession of the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and that we live like that. That we live controlled by Him.

We live in a world today where nobody wants to be controlled, don't we? Nobody wants to have a boss. Everybody wants to do their own thing. Everybody wants to have their own plan. Everybody wants to live life the way they want to live it. The problem is that when we come to Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are told by Scripture, we are commanded by Scripture, "You belong to Christ," and we better live that way.

A couple of quick thoughts about what it means to give, about what it means that in our hearts we have to be focused and what we have to have our eyes fixed on when we talk not only in this Christmas season, but 12 months a year. Number #1, we have to be prepared. Look what it says in verse 15, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." That idea of "sanctify" is literally setting apart. The idea of literally becoming something totally different. We talked about that last week. It comes from the Greek word *hagiazō*, which is where we get the root of the word "holiness."

I was listening this morning as I was driving in to the church very early to WRVL, and what a great job they do every day. I was listening to J. Vernon McGee. Anybody remember J. Vernon McGee, that old great preacher of yesteryear? Long since in heaven. But I was listening to him this morning and he made a statement that I'd never thought through the way he said it, and in that Tennessee drawl he has he said, "Have you ever thought about that literally if it weren't for Christ and what He has done in your life through the cross and the empty tomb," that the Holy Spirit that we all talk about, we want to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we want to have the Holy Spirit promised to us by Christ to come alongside us and to walk with us and to minister to us and to lead us each and every day, we want to be ministered to by the Holy Spirit, "the Holy Spirit couldn't touch you with a 20-foot pole if it weren't for what Jesus Christ did on the cross."

That's an important thought, because when we realize how depraved we are in our sinful nature, how evil we are, that we desperately needed that gift that came through that baby in the manger, that strange way to save the world, we had to have it if we have any chance whatsoever of being in the presence of a holy God. And so often Christians miss that. So often Christians don't understand the value of that gift, which is why we have to be prepared.

Setting ourselves apart, having that idea of verse 15 in the New Living Translation it says, "You must worship Christ as Lord of your life," as boss of your life, as in charge of your life, as the one who tells you what to do each and every day. The one that when you don't know what to do He is your first source for information, the one that literally when you have no hope whatsoever, that He is the one that you run to, the one that when you're making a decision between bad or

good, when you're deciding whether you should do something that is evil or stay away from it and do that which is Christlike, then we depend on Christ to lead us, to be our boss.

And let me tell you, that only comes from the Word of God. That is why we put such an emphasis here on studying the Word of God, on learning the Word of God. What we've been going through this year and going through our devotionals, our quiet time devotionals, what we're going to be doing next year, which I'm so excited about, to truly dig into the Word of God not only individually but as families together. We've got to do it because we've got to be prepared.

I'll tell you something. You have absolutely no hope, no chance whatsoever of impacting or discipling or changing or strengthening you or your family or this church or the world; you've got no chance of doing it if you are truly not prepared with the Word of God to do it.

So we've got to be prepared to give. Second, we've got to be prepared to give the right stuff. We live in a world where there is a lot of doctrine out there. You can turn on the television to any Christian station that is out there, pretty much, and you can flip around and watch and there are doctrines from every corner. You can get so confused by listening to preachers today, can't you? You can listen to preacher after preacher, and you can hear one thing from this preacher and something else from this preacher and something else from this preacher, and when you are done you are more confused than when you started because the doctrines are out there.

The Bible tells us that in the last days guess what's going to happen? Man, there is going to be stuff out there that is just going to blow your mind; people preaching false doctrines left and right. I'm going to tell you something. That is why this church is based on one thing and one thing only: We are preaching the absolute inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God and nothing else, because I'll tell you something else: There is nothing that I can tell you from my heart or from my mind that will do you any good whatsoever, be of any value whatsoever if it is not coming directly from the Word of God. Nothing.

We've got to be prepared to give the right stuff. If you don't know what is right, if you don't know what truth is, if you don't know what really, really matters, then what you do in life will not matter at all. Look what it says in the last part of verse 15, "Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you."

We've got to understand what we believe and why we believe it and be able to explain it and talk about it, to be able to share it. You know why we're not good at that? Because we are afraid of what might come afterwards.

We talk about witnessing, we talk about reaching the world, we talk about changing the world, but do you know this week I saw a statistic that says that 92% of people who attend evangelical churches like this one—92%, I say that over and over because I want it to sink in—92% have never shared the Gospel with anyone. You know why? We love the message, we love the hope that it brings, we love the truth of the Gospel, we love the death, burial and resurrection, we want to tell people about it, we pray about it, we want to share it with them, we're excited when people are saved. We want to do all that stuff, but we are afraid that when we explain what it is

that Jesus has done and how Jesus has come to the earth as a baby and that He went to the cross and He was buried and He rose again three days later and because of that if we will believe and confess with our lips and believe in our hearts that Jesus is Lord and was raised from the dead, we will be saved, we are scared to death that the person we are sharing that with will say, "How do you know that's true?"

So you know what we do? We don't share it. We let someone else do that. We hand them a tract because we are hoping that tract might have all that information in it because we are scared of what might come after we share the Gospel. Ninety-two percent. We've got to change that. We have to be prepared to give the right stuff, to be able to give an answer, to explain so they understand that John 14:6, when it says that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and no man comes to the Father except through Christ, we've got to be able to not only say that, but we've got to be able to say it with intelligence and let them know not only that the Bible says it, but here is why we know it to be true.

And listen, that only comes from the Word of God. We've got to be prepared to give the right stuff. Third thing we've got to be prepared to give to all. The church has got to be prepared to give to all. And I'm going to tell you something; the church doesn't have a really good track record here. You see, the church is always prepared to give to somebody who looks like us, aren't we? We're always prepared to give to somebody who comes from the same background. We're always prepared to give that message to someone who in past days, and unfortunately sometimes today, who is the same color as we are. We are prepared to do all of those things.

The church doesn't have a very good track record. Let me tell you something; we better be prepared to give to all, because all is who Christ died for. Jesus came to this earth and suffered that horrible death on the cross; He bled and died for you and me; He went through things that we can't even imagine, things that we can't even understand. Horrible, cruel death, painful death, and He did it for every person that has ever lived, that will ever live, and we the church of Jesus Christ better be passionate about making sure to take that message to everyone. Everyone.

That is why this church is so focused on missions; this church is so focused on giving out to people in need. That's why we want to earn the right to be heard. That's why we are so involved in church planting. Did you know that last year at Thomas Road that we planted over 1,300 churches around the world last year? That's pretty cool, isn't it? And in that group of those 1,300 churches that were planted, over 700 in India, about 600 in Kenya, a little over 130, 140 in Haiti, more in Guatemala, many here in the United States. And did you know that in all of those churches that today as we meet and in the last 18 months since we've planted those churches, over 93% of them are still meeting? That is a good attrition rate. Compare that to restaurants that start. I'm excited about that.

Did you know in those 1,300 churches the average attendance is over 34 people at each service? That's awesome. That's incredible. You've seen some pictures of those churches in Kenya where I've had the privilege to preach, meeting out under a tree. They are praising God just as much as we are in this beautiful room. They don't have these instruments like we do. They don't have a choir. They don't have these comfortable seats. They don't have any of that stuff. They sit there on hard benches, some on the ground, muddy ground with dirty clothes; haven't had fresh water

or baths in days, maybe weeks, have to walk miles to get to the closest food source, miles to the closest water source. And do you know what they do? They lift their hands and they sing with as much passion and as much heart as we do sitting here spoiled brats in America. And it gives me joy to see it. I love to see what they are doing.

And I love this. In the last 12 months, as a result of those 1,300 churches, do you know that we have had over 30,000 people accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in the last year? Thirty thousand. You know why? Because this church was started back in 1956 with a passion to give to all. This church was started back in 1956 with a passion to preach the message of the Gospel to anyone and everyone, because that is what Christ called us to do.

In the next couple of weeks, December 23rd and then on Christmas Eve and the following Sunday, those three services, I'm going to ask you—and unashamedly ask you to do this—you know as your preacher and pastor I don't often get up here and ask you for money and hit you hard about giving, and some of my staff gets mad at me for this. I don't do that, but unashamedly I'm going to ask you that as you're making those Christmas lists that we all have, all those gifts we've got to get and all those stores we've got to go to, I'm going to ask you to add to that list that you make a Christmas gift to God, because we're going to plant another 1,300 churches next year.

It costs us about \$220 to plant a church. Some of you think that's impossible. It doesn't cost a lot of money to plant a church under a tree. We've got to find them, identify the pastor—we don't call them, God calls them—and train them. We've got to make sure that they understand what the Word of God is. We've got to make sure they understand the Gospel, the doctrine of the Old Testament and New Testament. We train them on the ground, in person, face-to-face, and then we help them get started with that church, and it costs about \$220. I'm going to ask you to make a Christmas gift to Christ on those days, and I'm going to do that unashamedly.

I'm going to ask for that money every service on those days, and I'm going to do it proudly. You know why? Because there is no gift that you will give this year to anybody on your list that will result in 30,000 people coming to know Christ as Lord and Savior. That gift that you have to get at the mall before they run out, all that stuff that we've got to have that we can't live without, none of it is going to change the world. Listen: the Gospel changes the world, and I just want to be about taking the Gospel to the world.

Not only be prepared to give, not only be prepared to give the right stuff, not only be prepared to give to all, but we have to be prepared to give with the right heart, with compassion. Passion with compassion; understanding that if God sent His Son Jesus to die for the entire world, if God sent His Son Jesus to die for all, then it must mean—and the Bible tells us this is true—that God loves all, and if God loves all, that means that I can promise you this: God is going to treat all with compassion. And sometimes the church is the worst at that. We hear or see something of people that are living the wrong way or doing things that go against Scripture or maybe criticizing us or doing things we don't like and then we argue about it and complain about it, we get in their face and condemn them for it, all the while pushing them further and further away.

Passion but with compassion. Look what it says in the last part of verse 15, “With meekness and fear, having a good conscience.” That word “meekness” is the word that gives us the idea from the Greek word of “thoughtful, a gentle demeanor, a respectful disposition.” The word “fear” is not the word “hiding,” like getting behind something and worrying about it, not sharing our faith because we’re scared. That word in the Greek is the word *phobos*, a spirit of sobriety, of understanding how absolutely serious this is, of reverence for the message that we share, of the gift that has been given.

Verse 16 says you must do this in a gentle, respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then, if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ.” Understanding that what we do, we do because we belong to someone that is bigger than us. We belong to Him.

Listen, I know that when we go out and share this message, when we give this message, sometimes we run into people who don’t want to receive it. They don’t want it. They don’t want us to give them that gift. They don’t want us to give them the gift that changes their life and gives them hope. In fact, sometimes they reject it, sometimes they criticize it, sometimes they blaspheme it, they mock it. But you know that in life sometimes the greatest gifts we received we never even knew that we wanted them. Did you know that?

When I was a little kid, my Aunt Mary Ann, we called her Bobo (I have no idea why) used to work down on Main Street at United Virginia Bank, and right across the street from the bank where she worked was a toy store called Brown’s Toy Store. Every day Bobo would go to work, and she never made a lot of money but every day when she got off work (she never drove, never had a driver’s license) she would walk across the street to Brown’s Toy Store, and you know what she would do in there? She would walk into the toy store, probably the only one we had in town at that time, and every day she would buy me a toy, and man, as a kid there was nothing I looked forward to more than that. I was so excited about it because I never knew what I was going to get.

Every day was a surprise; every day was something new. Some days she would come home and give me a little Matchbox car, which I loved, and some days she’d give me a coloring book, or some days she’d give me a puzzle. Every day she would come home, having put thought and time into what gift she was going to buy me, and I never knew what to expect and I loved them so very much. Loved those gifts with all my heart.

Now as a kid I wasn’t afraid to ask for stuff, and I asked my mom and dad for stuff all the time, but I can honestly tell you that some of the greatest gifts that I received were those that I never even knew that I wanted until they were in my hands. That’s the exact same thing that is true of the Gospel. Don’t give up. When someone tells you they aren’t interested, don’t quit. When someone tells you they don’t want to hear the message of the Gospel, they’ve heard it before, they don’t like what they see and they’ve seen hypocritical Christians, don’t give up. Keep praying for them. I promise you this: they may not think that they want it, oh, but they do, and one day by God’s grace you might have the privilege and opportunity of seeing them come to know that what they now have in their hand that they never knew that they wanted brings them more joy than anything else.

Be prepared to give. As we come to this season of giving and the season of getting, understand that the things of value are far more important than the things that you buy at the mall, the things you buy online, the toys and the gifts and the things that you find in stores all over the place. It's far more important than that. This season is about Christ and it's about the love that He has, about the gift that He came to give. It's about salvation, it's about the only hope that any of us have, and there is going to come a day when every person in this room is going to be standing before Him, and I promise you this, any Xbox that you got will not make a difference at that time. Any iPad or iPhone is ever going to make one bit of difference at that point. When you stand before Him, all that is going to matter is what did you do with the Gospel?

And there are people sitting here in this room right now that have been in church your whole life, and if somebody came up to you and asked if you're a Christian, "Oh, absolutely. I've been in church since I was a little kid. I was baptized when I was a baby. My family took me to church. I'm a Christian." Let me tell you something: If there is not a moment in time where you have said, "God, I am a sinner in desperate need of a Savior and you, through your grace and your love for me, and sending Jesus to this earth who died on that cross and was buried and rose again, and I believe that with all my heart and I know that I am a sinner and I confess it to you today. And God I believe it with my heart, I confess it with my lips that you were raised from the dead, that you are Lord," if you have not done that, I don't care how long you have been in the church, you are not a Christian, and today is the best day to change that. Right now is the best time to change that.

(Singing: "Holy Spirit Reign")

Lord, today we come to you with open hearts, joyous hearts, grateful hearts for what you've done. As we leave this place, I pray that you would help us to walk out of here not only celebrating the season but celebrating you, knowing and understanding the incredible gift that you have given through your Son Jesus and what He did on the cross and Him walking out of that tomb, that He gives us everything that we need. He gives us salvation and hope. God, I pray that you will help us live with joy because of it and help us to all be prepared, at this season especially, not only to be focused on getting, but that we would be focused on giving, and giving that message to a world that so desperately needs to know you. In Jesus' precious name we pray, amen.

Keywords: Christmas, salvation, giving, evangelism, church planting, assurance, discipleship, compassion