



# The Perfect Christmas Gift?

Is there such a thing? What if there were?

Most of the famous (and infamous) Christmas memories I have are connected in one way or another to the pursuit of the perfect gift.

One year, knowing how much my father loved opening presents, that's what I got him—opening presents. I wrapped an empty jewelry box in a candy box that I then wrapped in a shoe box that I then wrapped in a... well, you get the idea. Somewhere between unwrapping the television box and the microwave box, "clever" kind of lost its charm.

There was one Christmas morning that it came down to the "perfect gift" available from the shelves at the corner 7-Eleven because it was the only store we could find open once we realized (on the way to a friend's house) that in all the hustle and bustle, we had forgotten to get that friend a gift. The gift was...well...a bit wanting.

Years ago, when my wife and I were only soon-to-be-my-wife-and-I, she bought me a sandwich maker that had to stay at her apartment so I went out and bought her a floor jack that I kept at mine. After a decade of marriage we tried once to resurrect that earlier bad idea. I shopped for my gift from her, she shopped for her gift from me, and on Christmas day we were surprised to find out what we had given each other. Once!

There are, of course, the ol' stand-by, go-to, "A"-for-effort perfect gift attempts; namely the gift card, the magazine subscription, jelly-of-the-month-club, nativity set, the family letter/video, any consumable with "butter" in the title, and the stapled pad of home-made gift certificates.

Don't get me wrong, there's a hint of greatness in all these gifts. Most of them continue to serve as great gifts. Yet, not perfect. Not the perfect Christmas gift.

But, what if there was the perfect Christmas gift?

What if there was a gift guaranteed to succeed? Free from economic flux. No wrapping. No shipping. A gift you'd even be happy to see re-gifted. A gift that gives the giver as much as the getter even though the getter may remain unaware that a gift has been gotten from the giver who has given it.

I think I know of such a gift.

This gift costs only the intention of the will and commitment to a simple discipline. Yet, for the giver as well as the getter, this gift promises a peace that is nothing short of a pure taste of heaven on earth.

This Christmas, give the gift of forgiveness.

Let me explain four simple steps to giving such a perfect gift.





Through four simple steps, each of us can give the perfect Christmas gift by practicing the discipline of forgiveness.

## **Forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you**

*Ephesians 4:32; John 20:23; Colossians 3:13; Mark 11:25; Matthew 6:12-15*

Grace, at its atomic level, consists of reconciliation. Though subject to myriad implications and applications both in orthodoxy and orthopraxy, fundamentally grace is about reconciliation. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation..." (*2 Corinthians 5:18*). And, much like the atomic level of the physical realm, reconciliation forms the building blocks for God's kingdom and provides immense - if not immeasurable - eternal power. This great power is experienced and expressed through the Christian discipline of forgiveness (*Matthew 6:12-14; 18:15-22; John 20:19-23; James 5:15-16*). In fact, at an essential level, can there even be such a thing as an unforgiving Christian - is this not the quintessential oxymoron? Forgiveness is the discipline of reconciliation and reconciliation is the heart of Grace. How then do we forgive?

Here are four scripture-based, Spirit-saturated, experientially-tested steps to the practical discipline of forgiveness:

### **1 Surrender Expectations**

*Psalm 130:3-4; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:1-5; Matthew 7:1-14; Matthew 18:23-35*

Expectations pervade our very existence. Since that fatal decision in the Garden of Eden, when everything was gambled on the expectation of being like God, we are consumed in and controlled by our expectations and their subsequent disappointments. Yet, the Bible reveals that expectations are not a part of God's economy. Indeed, living within the prison of expectations is the antithesis of grace. God released us of His expectations by paying the penalty for our sins while we were still His enemies. If we are to embrace the life offered in grace, we must break free from the entanglements of this fallen economy of expectations. We do so through the habitual discipline of surrendering the expectations we hold over others, especially those who have hurt us. This is not a debate as to whether our expectations are justified or even righteous; rather, it's an understanding of how God works. It could certainly be argued that God would be righteous in fostering the expectation that the pinnacle of his creation - human kind, whom he designed, created, and sustains in every breath - should honor him with all of who we are. But, he doesn't. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Get alone, get on your knees, pray out loud, and choose to live in God's economy of grace. Identify your expectations and surrender them. "Father, I surrender my expectation that ... would ..."

### **2 Capitulate Retribution**

*Psalm 78:36-39; Proverbs 24:29; Matthew 5:38-39; Romans 12:17-19; Psalm 35:1-3; Psalm 55:15-18*

The word capitulate means to surrender under agreed terms. Here it communicates surrendering our desires for retribution to the Lord. King David rarely minced words with God. Instead, he brought to God his sincere pain and honest desires concerning those who wounded him ("break the teeth in their mouths," "break the arm of the wicked," "strike all my enemies on the cheek," etc.). By doing so he provided us with a great example of what Jesus meant by turning the other cheek - not that

Christians would merely allow others to walk over them, but that Christians would practice the discipline of getting out of the way to let God fight their battles. Whether active retribution (e.g. keying someone's car) or passive retribution (e.g. rejoicing upon hearing of something bad that happened to them), let it go! Hand the ownership of getting even over to God. "Father, they hurt me so much, help me focus on you, while you go get them." As you continue to practice this discipline, your heart will soften and your prayers will begin to resemble some of the sweeter psalms of David, but in this step, drawing near to God in honesty and sincerity is most important.

**3**

### **Pray for Blessing**

*Romans 12:14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-16; 1 Peter 3:9; Luke 6:27-28; 2 Corinthians 5:19*

When Jesus' disciples were taught to forgive, they told him that there was something missing from the faith he had given them, and if he would give them more they might be able to accomplish this difficult task. Jesus' response was that they had all the faith they would ever need; they just needed to discipline themselves to work that faith all day, every day. Praying sincerely that God would bless the person who has hurt you requires a faith that is maturing daily. Such faith trusts that what Christ did on the cross was enough to atone for your sins as well as for the sins of those who have hurt you. Such faith trusts that the love God has shown you is the love he desires to show to everyone - even those who have hurt you. Just like step one and two, this step is a discipline that is best accompanied by bended knees and spoken prayers. Start by praying aloud, "God, bless them with your presence," (even if at first it is with clinched fist and gritted teeth). Then, look and listen for specific ways to pray for God's blessing in the details of their life. It grows impossible to hold on to hurt (and the ensuing cancer of bitterness) while habitually praying for God to bless the person who has caused that hurt.

**4**

### **Repeat as Needed**

*Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Matthew 16:19; Galatians 6:7-10*

Much like a wound that has to be dressed often at first and less as it heals, we too must go to our knees to pray out loud through these steps as often as the lump returns to our throat, the heat to our face, the churning to our gut, the thoughts to our mind, and the pain to our heart. Time does not heal all wounds. Persistent discipline over time does. Do not let the sun go down on your anger or hurt, but commit to walk through these steps over and over and over and over again. Though you may never tell the person about this gift of forgiveness (in most cases it may be better not to, at least for a while); though the person may never ask for forgiveness (they may even be dead); though it may never be appropriate to restore the relationship (especially in cases of abuse); and though it may require the intentional pursuit of familial, ecclesiological, and/or legal justice (some people must have their freedom to continue to injure others limited); you can forgive them. You can forgive them! It will take work, but soon you will experience the healing and peace and joy and freedom that flow from grace.

Give it a try. This year, give the perfect Christmas gift.  
Forgive and watch what happens.

**Memorized reading** is one of the most fulfilling ways to engage God's word. Put a word in front of the eye and the mind only has to recognize and repeat it. But, arrange a series of symbols that represent words and the mind readily stores the words in order. Have a friend read a verse from the Bible a few times while you follow along, then you'll be able to read it back to them. Give it a try, and have fun!

Memorized Reading Verses for **4 Steps 2 Forgiveness** (English Standard Version)

**Eph. 4:32:** "b K 2 1a, t♥, 4g 1a, a G i C 4g y." **John 20:23:** "i y 4g t S o a, t a 4g t; i y w/h 4g f/a, i i w/h." **Col. 3:13:** "B w/ la &, i l h a C a a, 4g e o; a t L h 4g y, s y a m 4g." **Mark 11:25:** "4g, i y h a a l, s t y F a w i i H m 4g y y T." **Mat. 6:12-15:** "4g u o D, a w a h 4g o D & L u n i 2 T, b D u f/ E. 4 i y 4g o t T, y H F w a 4g y, b i y d n 4g o t T, n w y F 4g y T." **James 5:15-16:** "& t P o F w S t l w i S, & t L w R h u. & i h h C S, h w b 4g. t4, C y S 2 1a & P 4 1a, t y m b H. t P o a R P h G P a i i W."

**Psa. 130:3-4:** "I y, o L, s m l n, o L, w c S? b w/ y t i 4g." **Rom. 5:8:** G S h L 4 u i t w w w s S, C D 4 u." **Eph. 2:1-5:** "y w D i t T & S i w y o W, f t c o t W, f t P o t P o t A, t S t i n a w i t S o D - a w w a o L i t P o o F, C o t D o t B & t M, & w b N C o W r, L t R o M. b G, b R i M, b c o t G L w/ w h L u, e w w w D i o T, m u A 2 g w/ C - b G y h b S." **Mat. 7:1-14:** "J n, t y b n J. 4 w/ t J y P y w b J, & w/ t M y u i w b M 2 y. w d y s t S t i i y B's E, b d n n t L t i i y o E? o h c y s 2 y B, 'L m t t S o o y E,' w t i t L i y o E? y H, 1<sup>st</sup> T t L o o y o E, & t y w s c 2 t t S o o y B's E. d n G D w i H, & d n T y P b 4 P, L t T t u F & t 2 A y. A, & i w b G 2 y; S, & y w F; K n, & i w b O 2 y. 4 e l w A R, & t l w S F, & 2 t l w K n i w b O. o w l o y, i h S A h 4 B, w g h a S? o i h A 4 a F, w G h a S? i y t, w a E, K n h 2 G G G 2 y C, h m m w y F w i i H G G t 2 t w a h! s w y w t o d 2 y, d a 2 t, 4 t i t L & t P. e b t N G. 4 t G i w & t W i e t L 2 D, & t w e b i a m. 4 t G i n & t W i h t L 2 L, & t w f i a f." **Mat. 18:23-35:** "t4 t K o H m b c 2 a K w W 2 S A w/ h S. w h b 2 S, l w b 2 h w o h 10,000 T. & s h c n p, h m O h 2 b S, w/ h W & C & a t h h, & P 2 b m. s t S f o h K n, l m h, 'h P w/ m, & I w p y e.' & o o P 4 h, t M o t S R h & 4 g h t D. b w t s S w o, h f l o h F S w O h a 100 d, & S h, h b 2 C h, s, 'P w y O.' s h F S f d & P w/ h, 'h P w/ m, & I w P y.' h R & w 7 p h i P u h s P t D. w h F S s w h t p, t w G D, & t w R 2 t M a t h T P. t h M S h & s 2 h, 'y W S! I 4 g y a t D b c y P w/ m. & s n y h h M o y F S, a I h M o y?' & i A h M D h 2 t J, u h s P a h D. s a m H F w d 2 e l o y, i y d n 4 g y B f/ y ♥."

**Psa. 78:36-39:** "t F h w/ t M; t L 2 h w/ t T. t ♥ w n S t h; t w n F 2 h C. y h, b C, A 4 t l n & d n D t; h R h A o & d n s u a h W r. H R t t w b F, a W t p & c n a." **Pro. 24:29:** "d n s, "I w d 2 h a h h d 2 m; I w p t M b 4 w h h d." **Mat. 5:38-39:** "y h H t i w s, 'a E 4 a E & a T 4 a T.' b I s 2 y, d n R t l w i E. b i a l S y o t R C, t 2 h t o a." **Rom. 12:17-19:** "R n l e 4 e, b g t 2 d w i h i t s o a. i P, s f a i d o y, L P w/ a. B, n A y s, b L i 2 t W r o G, 4 i i W r, "V i m, I w r, s t L." **Psa. 35:1-3:** "C, o L, w/ t w C w/ m; F a t w F a m! T h o S & B & R 4 m H! D t S & J a m P! s 2 m S, 'I a y S!" **Psa. 55:15-18:** "L D S o T; L t g d 2 S a; 4 E i i t D P & i ♥. b I C 2 G, & t L w S m. E & M & a N I u m C & M, & h H m V. H R m S i S f/ t B t I W."

**Rom. 12:14:** "B t w P y; B & d n C t." **2Cor. 5:14-16:** "t L o C C u, b c w h C t: t l h D 4 a, t 4 a h D; <sup>15</sup> & h D 4 a, t t w L m n L L 4 t s b 4 h w 4 t s D & w R. f/ n o, t 4, w R n l a 2 t f." **1Pet. 3:9:** "d n R E 4 E o R 4 R, b o t c, B, 4 2 t y w C, t y m o a B." **Luke 6:27-28:** "I s 2 y w h, L y E, d G 2 t w H y, B t w C y, P 4 t w A y." **2Cor. 5:19:** "i C G w R t W 2 t o h, n C t T a t, & e T 2 u t M o R."

**Mat. 18:21-22:** "t P c u & s 2 h, "L, h o w m B S a m, & I 4 g h? a m a 7 t?" J s 2 h, 'I d n s 2 y 7 t, b 7 7 t. **Luke 17:3-4:** "P A 2 y s! i y B S s, R h, & i h R, 4 g h, & i h S a 7 t i t d, & t 2 y 7 t, s, 'I R,' y m 4 g h." **2Cor. 2:5-11:** "n i a l h C P, h h C i n 2 m, b i s M - n 2 p i 2 S - 2 a o y. 4 s a l, t P b t M i e, s y s r t 2 4 g & C h, o h m b O b E x S. s I b y 2 r A y L 4 h. 4 t i w I W r, t I m T y & K n w y a O i e. a l w y 4 g, I a 4 g. i, w I h 4 g, i h 4 g a, h b 4 y s i t P o C, s t w w n b o W b S; 4 w a n l g o h D." **Mat. 16:19:** "I w g y t K o t K o H, & w y B o E s b B i H, & w y L o E s b L i H."