

Gifts/ God's grace

Fran: I received a special gift this week, a priceless work of art. It's a drawing from my grand-daughter Adela, and it's stuck on my door. No-one would want to buy it, but it's priceless to me because it's a gift of love. What's the best gift you've ever received?

Carol: Hello! I'm Carol, and this is Women of Hope and Tammy and I are so glad to be with you.

Tammy: It's always great to be with you again. Carol, Fran and I have been talking about the best gifts we've received. Mine was a Christmas gift from my oldest son about 3 years ago. He was an adult at the time and you can tell that he put a lot of thought into it. It was a long rectangular basket divided into sections. And in each section he put my favourite perfume or lotion or body wash, and wrapped that up and gave it to me for Christmas. Little did he know that they were my favourite smells, but that basket was a caddy. I have people over to eat all the time, and I'm able to put forks, spoons and knives in each of the sections and my napkins in the back. He didn't know what he was giving me. He just thought it was a nice basket. It was one of the most thoughtful gifts I've ever received.

Carol: We've talked before about how we have favourite love languages. Love languages are the different ways we like to show love. We talked about spending time together... putting our love into words... doing things to help, and touching in a friendly and safe way. So today we'll talk about the last love language- *giving gifts*. I hope you'll stay with us.

Fran: Where I live, the postman comes every day, bringing mail. Other people put things in my letterbox too. There are coloured leaflets advertising- well, anything you can imagine! In the weeks before Christmas, and other holiday times, the letterbox is overflowing with these advertisements, especially for clothes, jewellery, perfume, chocolates, restaurants- all those expensive things we don't need. We call it 'junk mail'!

Tammy: And mostly we use it to light the fire! It's just junk- rubbish.

Fran: Now if you believe the junk mail, you would think most people want expensive presents, but I actually find this isn't very important as a way of feeling loved.

Carol: When I think about it, I have to say that I usually like a gift because the giver thought about me or spent time making it.

Fran: Yes: like my granddaughter's drawing. I love to receive her gifts because they say to me 'I love you Nana'.

Tammy: Yes, those gifts that our children make are precious, aren't they? Even when they're grown up, we still love to receive something they've made.

Fran: My daughter's love language is gifts, I think. She never has much money but she looks for little thoughtful presents. She loves the things I buy her at the second-hand stall - she says it shows I think about her when she's not there.

Tammy: I wonder if your husband or child sees gifts as a special sign of love? A gift is a symbol of love that he can see. He can hold it in his hand and say, "Look, she thought about me.' The gift itself is a symbol that you thought about him. It doesn't matter whether it costs money. It may be something you found, or made. What is important is that you thought about him. If your husband's favourite love language is receiving gifts, you can become a skilful gift giver. It's one of the easiest love languages to learn.

Carol: So, where do you begin? Well, think of all the gifts your husband has been most happy to receive through the years. Make a list of them, and see what sort of things he really loves. If you can't think of many, then just listen for things he says about what he needs and likes. It will give you an idea of the kind of gifts he would like to receive. I will often hear my husband say he likes a certain piece of music and the first

chance I get, I write that down. I know for certain that if I can get him that, it will be something he will enjoy.

Tammy: And what gifts do your children really like? One might love books, another might like toy cars, or their favourite kind of food, or something to do with their favourite sport. It wouldn't work to give every child the same gift, would it? As an example, my oldest son loves spiced apple cider. My youngest son can't stand it! I made a pot of spiced cider. When my oldest son walked in from work, he knew that Mom thought about him. A good gift suits the person.

Fran: You don't have to spend money to give gifts that mean a lot. Perhaps it's something you don't need any more, or something you can make or cook. I love to recycle things to make them useful for someone else, so most of my gifts are home made. But what matters is the generous heart that inspires you to give. If your love language is giving gifts, you'll just love to be generous. I guess a *generous* gift is one that costs you something, whether it's money, time, or maybe parting with something you love.

Carol: I think the perfect gift is the one that shows you understand what your friend likes or needs, and you've made an effort to find the right gift for them. So what is the best gift you've ever given?

Tammy: We've been talking about how some people really enjoy giving gifts to show their love.

Fran: If someone gives you a gift, do you think you need to give a gift in return?

Carol: I know lots of people do think that way. I hear them in the shops, worrying about what Christmas or birthday gift they should give, and hoping it will be as good as the one they receive. I think they are afraid of being embarrassed.

Tammy: That's a very strong rule in some cultures- if you give a gift you expect to get one. What do *you* think about that?

Fran: You know, I think it's not really a gift; it's an exchange. It's almost like a business deal; only much harder, because you don't quite know what's expected!

But God isn't like that with his gifts. He gave us an amazing gift- he sent his beloved son the Lord Jesus Christ to live here on earth. Jesus showed us what God is like, and made a way for us to be put right with God.

I'm thinking about something Jesus said- 'It's much more blessed, more happy, to give than to receive.' (Acts 20:35) If gifts are your love language, you probably agree with that. But did Jesus just mean that it's fun to give nice surprises? No, I think he was telling us that God is generous, and he wants us to be generous too. When we choose to be generous, we grow better in character. We become less selfish and more like God.

Carol: Oh, I agree. God is a *great* giver of gifts. He gave us life, and he created this world for us to enjoy. (1 Tim 6:17) When you see a lovely sunset, or hear a child laughing... or a bird singing... or taste a delicious fruit, do you realise that these are *gifts* from God?

Fran: I think my favourite word in God's word, the Bible, is '*grace*'. Grace means showing love that isn't deserved. It's like giving a wonderful gift to someone who has no chance of paying you back. 'Grace' is the word used to describe how God treats us.

I want to tell you a story that was reported in an American newspaper, the *Boston Globe*, in 1990. A couple were engaged to be married, and they went to a big hotel to book their wedding reception. They wanted everything to be beautiful, so it was very expensive. They paid half the cost as a down payment. But when the time came to send the wedding invitations, the man changed his mind, and didn't want to get married.

The woman went to the hotel to cancel the wedding feast, and found that she could not get her deposit back. If she cancelled, she would lose most of the money she had paid.

Now this woman had once been very poor, living on the streets and in a shelter for homeless people. But she had got a good job and saved up money. So she had an unusual idea. She decided to go ahead with the party. She would still have a love feast. But she didn't invite her wealthy friends. She sent invitations to the shelters for homeless people, and to people who worked with those who were unemployed, old and poor. So, on the night when the wedding was meant to take place, there were people who were homeless, sick and old. There were addicts, beggars and out-of-work people. They were served by the best waiters, they ate chicken and caviar and chocolate cake, and danced to wonderful music. [from 'What's so amazing about grace?' by Philip Yancey (Zondervan, 1997)]

Tammy: That's a true story, and it reminds me of something Jesus said. He was talking to an important religious leader who invited him to dinner. I'll read you the words from God's word, the Bible. Jesus said

'When you give a dinner, don't invite your family, your friends, or the rich neighbours who will invite you back. No, when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind; and you will be blessed, because they are not able to pay you back. God will repay you on the day of resurrection.' (Luke 14: 12-14)

Fran: Jesus was talking about showing grace- in this case, showing grace to people with special needs, who couldn't give anything in return. God shows grace like that, because we can't pay him back. But grace is even more than that; it's like giving a wonderful gift to someone who has treated you very *badly*.

The Lord Jesus told a parable, a story that explains how God feels about you. Some of the law teachers and religious leaders were complaining. They said 'This man Jesus

welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!' So Jesus told them this story. (Luke 15:1-3)

Ros: There was a man who had two sons. The younger son said, 'Father, give me my share of the property now.' So the Father divided the property between his sons, and the younger one sold his share, took his money and went to a far-away country, where he wasted all his money in extravagant, careless living.

Fran: Let's stop and think about this for a moment. Do you think that was ok, for the son to ask for his inheritance while his father was alive?

Tammy: No! That was almost like saying he wished his father were dead! In Jesus's time, that was a terrible thing to do. And then the young man wasted the money that his father had worked hard to save. He just spent it foolishly, on pleasures.

Fran: Right, so he had really insulted his father, and disgraced himself, and cut himself off from the family. Everybody would have known about it, and despised him. Let's hear what happened next, in the story Jesus told.

Ros: When the younger son had spent all his money, there was a bad famine in that country. This young man got a job feeding pigs, to keep from starving. He was so hungry he wished he could eat the bean pods that the pigs were eating.

At last he came to his senses and said, 'My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here am I, about to starve. I'll get up and go back to my father, and I'll say 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I'm not fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.'

He was still a long way from home when his father saw him in the distance. The old man's heart was filled with pity, and he ran to meet him, threw his arms around his son,

and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I'm not fit to be called your son...'

But the father was already calling to his servants. 'Hurry, he said, Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the fattest calf and prepare a feast for us to celebrate. For this son of mine was dead to me, but now he's alive. He was lost, but now he's been found.' So the feast began.

Carol: What do you think about this story from God's word? Did you notice what I did? That the father *ran* to meet his son, when he could hardly see him in the distance?

Tammy: He must have been looking for him, scanning the road, day after day, hoping he would come home. He ran- that's not what a dignified landowner, an older man, would normally do! But he couldn't wait to see his son. And he didn't wait to hear him say he was sorry - already he was ordering the celebration feast.

Fran: Did it surprise you, that the father would show such grace to his son? What do *you* think the people listening to Jesus would have thought?

Tammy: I think those outcasts and sinners would have been really excited. They knew this was really a story about God, and how we hurt God by the bad things we do. They knew they had broken God's law, they knew they could never be good enough. But Jesus was saying that God still loved them, and welcomed them to come home to him.

Fran: I'm sure you're right Tammy. Jesus told them 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who is really sorry and turns from his sin, than over 99 respectable people who don't see any need to repent.' It's a story that's all about grace.

Carol: The outcasts would have loved the story, but I think the teachers of the law and religious people would *not* have liked it. You can almost hear them say 'That's not fair! The good son should have gotten the party, not the bad son!'

Fran: Yes; so let's hear the rest of the story that Jesus told.

Ros: So what about the older son? He was coming in from working in the field, when he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the workers and asked 'What's going on?' 'Your brother has come back home,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattest calf, because he got him safely back'.

The older son was so angry that he refused to go into the house; so the father came out and begged him to come in. But he answered, 'Look, I've worked hard for you for years, I've always obeyed your orders. You never gave me even a goat to have a party with my friends! But this son of yours has wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back, you kill the fattest calf for him!'

The father answered, 'My son, you are always here close to me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was as dead and he is alive; he was lost and now he has been found.'

Fran: Why do you think Jesus told this part of the story? Did the father love the elder son any less? Not at all; but the elder son was jealous, and he couldn't share his father's joy.

Tammy: I think Jesus was talking to those people who were so strict about keeping the law, but didn't care about the outcasts. If they cared about God's honour, they would be *glad* that sinners were turning to God, not *jealous*.

Carol: Have you ever lost something precious, and then found it again? You're happier than you were *before* you lost it, aren't you? And what if *your* child ran away, and you thought they were dead, and then they turned up safe again? You would be more relieved and excited than if they had never gone missing. And that's what Jesus was saying: God loves us so much, he wants so much for us to come back to him. He offers us free grace, and he is *delighted* when we turn to him. Grace is much more than just being fair. God is so gracious that he forgives our past and welcomes us into his family.

Fran: There are lots of religions in the world, aren't there? And they all offer us ways to earn approval. They tell us the rituals to perform, the words to say, the laws to keep, the sacrifices to make, the times to pray, so that we can feel accepted. But the way of Jesus starts at a different place. It starts with the love that God has for us, love that doesn't depend on us being good enough at all. In God's word it says 'While we were still sinners, Jesus Christ died for us.'

Jesus himself was the greatest love gift that God could give. (Jn 3:16) You know something else: the Bible tells us that *eternal life* is God's free gift. *Forgiveness* is a gift: our only part is to realise we really, really need God to forgive us. We need his power to change. We have to accept it in faith. I don't mean just accept it as an idea. Accept it as a *gift*.

Carol: You can accept God's gift today. You can just pray to God, in your heart. Tell him you need him to forgive you, and thank him for his love and grace. You can accept Jesus as the one who died in your place. This is the best gift ever, and it's yours to accept today.

Tammy: If you have accepted God's gift, or if you want to know more about how to become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, please contact us, and we will do our best to help you. We would love to hear from you. You can write to us through this station, or at TWR Women of Hope. The email address is TWRWomenofHope@twr.org. That's TWRWomenofHope@twr.org. Or if you missed a program or want to hear one again visit our website TWRWomenofHope.org or visit our Facebook page. We do hope you will be with us again.

Fran: Goodbye for now, my friend. Let's meet again soon!

Carol: Goodbye, and we pray that you will know God's grace in your life today.