

A Present with no Wrap

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[0 : 00] This morning we are reading from Matthew chapter 11, verses 20 through to the end of the chapter. So 11 verse 20. Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?

You will be brought down to Hades, for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.

At that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to the little children.

[1 : 06] Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. And no one knows the Son except the Father.

And no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is life.

Well, let's pray first before we start. Almighty God, we are so thankful that we can have this opportunity to come together, to listen to your word, to worship you, to spend time with one another. We thank you for such a privilege, and so thank you for even greater things that is to happen as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the coming of the new city.

[2 : 20] Thank you, Lord. We ask that you may help us today in worshipping you in spirit and in truth. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay, so because it's Christmas, that's why I chose this title, A Present with No Wrap.

Have you ever received a present which was not wrapped up in some way? I've always think that it's a waste of time and material to wrap presents up because we are going to throw those papers away.

Scientists estimates that every year during this time of the year, in the United States alone, there's five million tons of waste because of gift wraps and packaging.

It's quite a lot of waste that the world is producing. But then I think about it.

I sense that we do feel embarrassed to receive a present that is not wrapped up in some way. So what is the function of the gift wrap? Why do we have this wrap?

[3 : 34] So I can think of two things. I mean, it could be more than that. First of all, you can reveal the intention of the giver. So the way that the gift is wrapped up, you know whether the gift is given to you with delight or whether it was an obligation.

It depends on how it is packaged up. On the other hand, the gift wrap can also conceal the embarrassment of the giver. That is, in particular in Chinese culture, we give anbaos as presents. So anbaos are just small red brackets. It's red paper envelopes with money inside. When I was young, I looked forward to Chinese New Year because I never had any money from my parents during the year.

So there's only time of the year that I would receive money that would belong to myself. So people who were a generation older than I was would give me anbaos.

I remember that some of our relatives were quite poor, so they couldn't afford to give much. They could give the smallest note, this \$1 a note. And it is quite embarrassing if I open the anbaos.

[4 : 47] Sure, I suppose it's quite embarrassing for them. But because we are not supposed to open the anbaos until the New Year period is over, so it saves them in that embarrassment.

And so, yeah, the gift wrap can, first of all, reveal the intention of the giver. Also, it can conceal the embarrassment of the giver.

During my younger time, the anbaos were just plain red envelopes. But now they become so commercialized that these envelopes come in elaborate designs and qualities.

So sometimes the envelopes they sell could be more expensive than the money that it contains.

And so that's how the packaging has been changing. So the elaborate wrapping of a present has gradually replaced the value of the present.

So instead of showing how much the givers value the recipients, the attractive wrappings of anbaos envelopes are now telling how the recipients value the givers.

[5 : 52] So with the advancement of technologies, we have learned more and more new ways to show others how valuable we are. We live in a generation that sees and treasures mostly what is on the surface.

So from makeups to cosmetic surgery, fashions to sports, from titles to positions, they are all for keeping up with appearance.

So there are just recent articles there. The package has become the message. So it's just talking about how the world has changed. So now if you buy an iPhone or any phone, the package itself is very important.

And then you look at YouTube, there are people who say unboxing the thing. So the box itself has become very important. Or in the supermarket, if you look at all the products, just like cleaning, toilet cleaning products they sell, if you don't know which one to buy, you're more likely to buy one that is most attractive.

It doesn't matter what the content is. And so that is how the world has become. So when I'm in Malaysia, the fact that I am a doctor, I have a title, that makes it easier for me to preach in churches because it's easier for the church leaders to invite someone who has a title to be a guest speaker.

[7 : 17] So people are being invited to listen to me because I have a title. You might think that the Asians were shallow in the assessment of a person trusting just in the titles.

That's my titles can be my covering. They don't know about my heart. Okay. So that is in Asia. But in Australia, so even though we do not care so much about titles, but we adore, we care more about even more superficial things.

You can notice that on the television, who gets interviewed, who gets the talk to influence the society is people who are very good in sports or people who are very good in singing or acting. They become the opinion leaders. They become the one who is in the community. And that is all still occurring, external things that we are looking at.

So we have learned to wrap ourselves up with our achievements or appearance. We also learned to wrap ourselves up and expand our behaviors with signs.

[8 : 32] So when you see that there's an unusual crime committed, the news station would invite some experts to explain why such an event happened.

So a professor so-and-so would explain to relate the criminal's childhood experience, past traumatic exposures, and present circumstances, to explain why they act like that.

there are no more bad people. Everyone is a victim of something that causes them to do something against the law. It is true that we can all be victims at times, but we have to remember that Jesus was the ultimate victim, and we can see how he lived.

He did not make use of his victimhood to cover himself up. He remained righteous and kind. So just a brief introduction.

Just to say that we have learned to cover ourselves up with different gift wraps, either our achievements, appearance, or victimhood.

[9 : 40] Why do I choose victimhood as one of them and there are more of them? Because I just see so many patients who are in a state of just dysfunctioning, and their excuses are usually the victimhood.

Yes, no doubt. There are lots of victims. A lot of people are abused as they were young or even as old. But then if they keep living under the victimhood, their life will always be miserable.

It's hard to help them. And that is so common. That's why I mentioned that. It's one of the coverings that we use. So we'll go to Matthew 11.

We'll start to 20 to 24 first. So we're talking about Jesus who was walking in Palestine among the Israelites. The generation of people there have become quite sophisticated.

They are more learned, or at least they have the Pharisees and people who are learned and can explain things better by the time Jesus came.

[10 : 48] So Jesus said, if the miracles that he performed had been done in Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, the people of these cities would have repented of their sinful ways. So Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities that coexisted with Israel for many years.

Sodom was a city that was long gone. It was a thousand years ago when it was destroyed by God because it's been a sinful city. So these cities were pagan cities, or Gentile cities.

They did not know God. But Jesus said they would have repented if Jesus had performed miracles among them. The people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Kaplanon saw the miracles, but they did not repent.

Jesus warned that they would suffer a harsher judgment than the people of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. Why would the people of Israel, the Israelite cities, suffer a more serious judgment than the former cities?

I think you can think of at least two reasons. One, because they have been given the law and the prophets. They were told to expect the coming of the Messiah, and they were told what the Messiah would do.

[12 : 03] And number two, because the coming of the kingdom of God had been proclaimed to them there and then by John the Baptist, by Jesus himself, by Jesus' disciples. So they were given the information, and they were given the warning, they were given the invitation, and they ignored Jesus.

Why did they ignore Jesus? Why did they distrust Jesus despite the mighty words done by him? I think one of the things is that because they had religion, unlike other cities, the pagan cities didn't have organized religion, but they have organized religion.

Religion became their identity. Their leaders wrap themselves up with religion. So their speeches, their prayers, their conduct, they all portray what was respectable in the community.

Jesus and John the Baptist did not behave as their leaders did. And so Jesus and John the Baptist did not fit into their mold, their idea of what God is like.

So, if Jesus had performed these miracles in the barbaric cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, these people would fear him and listen to him.

[13 : 28] But in the civilized city of Tauracin, Bethsaida, Cabernet, people there had already formed their idea about what God would look like. They had created God in their own image.

Jesus' miracle might be useful to them, but Jesus' words were a threat to their religious wrapping. They did not want Jesus to remove their wrapping and reveal what was inside their hearts.

Our wrappings are very fragile. We try our best to protect this wrapping because we think our identities are dependent on them. I'll just give you an example of what's happening just recently just at the moment.

In recent months, Netflix started a dating show called Sexy Beast. I'm not sure anybody watch it? No? Sorry.

I have not watched it either. I don't even have Netflix. I got my information from an article in the Atlantic Magazine dated 29th October.

[14 : 36] It was written by Megan Garber. She wrote about how reality TV has become absurd to the extreme. This show claims that when it comes to dating, we all go for looks first.

In this show, everyone looks as weird as possible. So the role of the makeup or camouflage is to stop participants from choosing a partner based on his or her look.

the show's premise is correct in recognizing that we are more than our looks. If you decide on a spouse just based on looks, we will be in for a big shock after we get married.

But the show's solution is both dishonest and wrong. Dishonest because all the participants would review their looks at the end. So would they choose someone who is not attractive to take part in the show?

I doubt it. Wrong because regardless of what wrapping you use to cover up a person, he or she is not going to reveal their hearts in a show like this.

[15 : 40] So Megan Garber concludes, Sexy beast confuses spectacle for interestingness. Its ultimate feeling though is that it confuses appearance with identity.

I was surprised by Megan Garber's insight into the problem we are facing. The problem of identity in the eye generation about dignity in a digital space and about the meaning of our existence.

She said sexy beast confuses the external wrapping with the present or the person inside. Putting another layer of gift wrap on the present does not usually help revealing the identity of the present person. We cannot know a person by his or her external appearance. We cannot even know ourselves by our external appearance or achievements.

So during the time of Jesus, Nicodemus visited him at night. Being a well-known and respected religious leader, Nicodemus did not want to be seen with Jesus publicly.

[16:55] Privately, Nicodemus sensed that his religious training and achievement did not give him peace in his heart. His religious wrapping gained him respect but did not give him rest.

In fact, he became more restless and uncertain about himself. So he was hoping Jesus could help him. Andre Agassi, the eighth-time Grand Slam winner, wrote in his autobiography, the name of the book is called Open, Now that I have won a Slam, I know something that very few people on earth are permitted to know.

A win does not feel as good as loss feels bad, and the good feeling doesn't last as long as the bad not even close. vast majority of tennis players would never win any title, but even for those few who managed to win all the titles, they would find that their achievements were not enough to define them, to give them a satisfying identity.

Throughout history, people have been struggling to be happy, and suspect that most of the participants in Sassy Beast were not there to seek their identity, they were there to have fun.

However, our concern of fun points to the emptiness and restlessness of our hearts. Our man-mixed world has invented many ways to help cover up the pregnancy inside our hearts.

[18:30] Religion is one of them, occupations, what we do to occupy our time, drugs and alcohol, gambling, games, phonography, sports, and all sorts of therapies.

We think that we are wise and full of knowledge. We think we know how to deal with our sense of loss and meaninglessness. To the wise and learned, the message of the cross belongs to the fools. Only fools who believe that there is such a thing as sin, and that the creator God will need to send his son to die on the cross for the redemption of our sins. In Matthew 11, 25-26, we are told what Jesus' identity is.

In verse 25, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the understanding and revealed them to little children.

God is sovereign. Why did Jesus thank God for hiding the truth from the wise and the learned or the understanding? Because God was affirming Jesus' sovereignty.

[19:48] Jesus is equal to God. He said, no one knows the son except the father, and no one knows the father except the son. It is only when Jesus is sovereign that we can worship him and put our trust in him.

It is only when Jesus is sovereign that he can offer us life and he can call us to him. The wise and the learned cannot in any way frustrate the will of Jesus.

Jesus is the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. Jesus does not use worldly qualifications or attractive external appearance to define himself, nor does he make use of his victim hope to defend himself.

For those who have ears to hear, the identity of Jesus is planned it is only when we see who Jesus is, we could come before him with humility.

And if we do not come before Jesus in humility, we are not coming to him at all. He is not there to beg people to believe him.

[20:53] He is there to decide who will believe him. He calls those whom he has chosen. How does Jesus call those who have chosen?

then we come to Matthew 11 28-30. In verse 28, Jesus said, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

So when does Jesus do this? When does Jesus call us? I think when these two things happen, one, when he reveals the ugliness of our hearts, two, when he reveals his own beauty to us.

Jesus knows that our hearts are restless. He wants us to find rest for our hearts. From birth to death, we labor for one thing or another. Our hearts are usually full of burdens.

What are some of the burdens that we carry every day? we can mention any number of burdens. I'll mention five.

[22 : 01] One is about livelihood, so we worry about having enough money to live, to pay our bills, to pay for children's education, and so on.

Two is about our health, sickness and death. we worry about those. Three is about disappointments. We struggle with that.

Things that we expect to happen doesn't take place, or people that we expect to behave in one way and not.

And so we have disappointments every day. Four, relationship problem. that's very common relationship.

The closer we are to someone, the easier we get hurt. And day to day, we struggle with that. Five is religion itself.

[23 : 06] And that is, I suppose, the main thing among the Jews, Israelites at that time. To them, the law is a heavy burden.

They can't fulfill it. They know they have to. So those who think that they have, like the Pharisees, they become proud. Those who think that they couldn't do it, they become despair.

there. So it is difficult to live in this world so much. Burden, so much restlessness in our heart.

But what I have just mentioned are only the outer wrappings of a deeper problem in our hearts. We usually try to resolve the outer wrappings, blaming others for our circumstances, for our struggles.

We cannot see beyond these wrappings to realize that there is a deeper problem. The deeper problem is that I'm a rebel against God and I'm living under God's judgment.

[24 : 03] If you remember Genesis chapter 3 when God put the curse or the judgment on Adam and Eve, so both Adam and Eve would go through hard times in some way.

The woman would labor for childbirth, men would labor, to produce a living. That is a very basic problem that we are facing that needs first to be resolved.

In God's mercy, He uncovers those or remove those outer wrappings and let us see what is inside our hearts. When God does that, we will see the wickedness and foolishness in our hearts.

We will realize that we are the main cause of the breakdowns of relationships. of our disappointments, our lack of faith, our desire to validate ourselves.

We can think of many, many things. Why? It's not other people or circumstances so much. It's more our own desire and expectation and our selfish, self-centeredness.

[25 : 20] It's causing a lot of the struggles that we're facing. we thank God that He does not leave us without our way out. At the same time, we are convicted of our own wickedness and foolishness.

God also opened our eyes to see Jesus. And we see a person who is pure and gentle, a person who is loving and just, a person who is humble and unyielding, a person who has a purpose and a hope, a person who has no deceit and is full of grace and truth.

A person who came to the world without any wrapping of physical attraction, position, or qualifications, a person who gave up the last bit of his own identity and dignity to die on the cross.

Do you know that? To die on the cross is more than pain. It's shame. He died naked publicly. So he became a non-entity basically.

He's not a person on the cross. But he gives that up too so that we might find identity and dignity in him. When we first see Jesus, he might become offensive to us.

[26 : 39] I hope that he does in some way. So reflecting on why he believes in Jesus, the poet W.H. Orden wrote, I believe because he fulfills none of my dreams.

I believe because he fulfills none of my dreams. Because he is in every respect the opposite of what he would be if I could have made him in my own image.

Why Jesus and not Socrates or Buddha or Confucius or Muhammad? none of the others arose all sides of my being to cry crucify him.

I hope that when we see the Lord Jesus Christ he's offensive to us in some way. But when he does that to me I will need to choose either to crucify him or to crucify me.

There's no two ways. You can't be one or the other you have to choose. Jesus' invitation is given to those who know nothing good dwells in them.

[27 : 57] To those who have seen what is good in Jesus and know they can never be like him.

Paul in Romans 7 18 and 19 said For I have decided to do what is right but not the ability to carry out.

For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Jesus' invitation is like a present with no wrap.

There's no wrap. There's no name on the wrap. There's no name. How do you know that it's for you? You know the present is for you when your eyes open to see the weakness in your heart and when you can see that your one that you but it is because of your pride, your foolishness or your covetousness.

Jesus' invitation to present with wrap, you can see what he is offering. He wants you to follow him and not your own ways. He wants you to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and not your own.

He wants you to accept the burden of the cross. He wants you to have rest. you to come to him because he is useful or pitiful.

[29 : 16] Jesus wants you to come to him because he is beautiful. He wants to give you his beauty. He wants to give you rest. When we see that there is nothing good in us and see that all that is good is in Jesus, Jesus is then inviting us to follow him.

In Jesus Christ we will receive grace upon grace. The first grace helps us to follow Jesus to the cross nailing our own weakness to the cross.

The second grace is being given the beauty of Jesus Christ. God can look at us and see a beauty that is not our own. We can come before God and relate to him as our father.

The third grace is being given the Holy Spirit to live out the beauty of Jesus. Yes, there will still be struggles when we follow Jesus, a different kind of struggle.

In the past, we struggled restlessly because we did not have a hope, we did not have any vision. Now we struggle restfully. We will struggle with our old sinful nature, but we know that Jesus has overcome.

[30 : 25] We can face accusation from the devil that we are still bad inside our heart. We can answer such accusation by saying, I know I am worse than you think, but it is no longer I live.

It is Christ who lives in me. We still may struggle with broken relationship, but the struggle is not to vindicate ourselves, the struggle is to love others like Jesus did to us.

When I prepared for this sermon, I have some difficulty deciding whether the title of this sermon, a gift with no wrap or a present with no wrap. Gift sounds better, but I choose present because the offer is the presence of a person, the God man, Jesus Christ.

It may sound kinder if I tell you that it is okay if you decline his offer, if you decline his imitation, but it's not really kind for me to say so for two reasons.

One, this is the Do you want real happiness? You may labour or you like to get it. You can never find it unless you first follow Jesus and take his yoke upon you.

[31 : 40] Come to Jesus. He is gentle and lowly. He does not laugh at our foolishness, nor does he belittle our attempt to be good. In Jesus you will find rest for your souls.

The second reason is that the consequence of disregarding Jesus would be judgment for our wickedness. The true beauty will ultimately overthrow all the ugliness, either by turning the ugly into beauty or by destroying the ugly.

May God have mercy on us and help us to see beyond whatever is on the surface. All superficial attractions, positions, and explanations do not last long.

Only what is deep inside will remain forever. We cannot change what is inside us, but Jesus can. Let's pray. Father God, thank you for knowing our own weakness, our own foolishness, our own rebellion.

and thank you for also knowing the longings of our heart, our longing to be pure, our longing to be accepted, our longing to have a purpose in life.

[33 : 08] Thank you also for the invitation to life. May help us to do so to see the Lord Jesus Christ today.

Thank you, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.