THE BABY WE WORSHIP
Matthew 2:10–11

Introduction: Gift Giving

• It’s Christmas week. So now you have about five days left to get the perfect gift for that special someone before Christmas. Or you have just two days left to get that special something from the comfort of your home through Amazon Prime, which is the best mode of shopping ever.

• Buying the right gift can be difficult; almost exhausting. Will they like this toy? Can I find the right size? What if they wanted a different color? Finding the right gift for someone you love can be very difficult. I can’t tell you how many times our family has called us the past several weeks asking for gift ideas for our children. I just tell them they don’t want anything.

Do you know what should matter more than the gifts that we give? Unfortunately, it is often just about the gift when it should be about the heart of the giver. Too often we make it about the object of the thing given when it should be about the grace that anything is given. And while we have a hard time seeing past the gift, it is not something God struggles with. He sees very clearly. When we turn to the gifts that we give the Lord, let’s just call it our worship, He cares much more about the heart of our giving than whatever puny gift we give Him.

We are in week four of our series on worship for this Advent season. To review, there are three main steps involved in worship: (1) Finding something or someone worthy of glory; (2) Presenting ourselves to that person or thing; and (3) sacrificing for that person or thing. This is what happens in all worship. And what we learned last week is that the way we sacrifice ourselves is by allowing the Lord to change us as we strive to think Christianly instead of secularly about everything in this life.

This morning, we come to an example of genuine worshippers. They are genuine givers, who find someone worthy of worship, present themselves to Him, and sacrifice in worship to Him. They do not hesitate to make a long and difficult journey (some say more than a thousand miles) to render homage and worship to someone that most people would have regarded simply as a mere child. The baby Jesus. But their heart radiates for us this morning as an example of biblical worship. They are, of course, the wise men as recorded in Matthew 2.
My goal this morning is simply to retell their story, focusing some of our time and attention on the gifts, but also the heart in giving. This is where we will find a great act of worship.

Vs. 1–2 ➔ These events of the wise men coming to look for Jesus take place in the days of Herod the king. This is Herod the Great. He is a very powerful ruler of Rome that has been instituted as the king over the land of Israel. His power is legendary. But so is his jealousy.

It’s hard to imagine a king with the ruthless nature as this man. I mean, can you imagine a king of a nation today becoming so paranoid that he kills his wife and at least two of his sons because he thinks they might be making an attempt to overthrow his rule as king? We need to remember that paranoia as a backdrop to three wise men rolling into town asking, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” We can only imagine that when Herod hears this question, he would be extremely freaked out.

The biblical account of the wise men is one of those biblical texts with much debate surrounding it. But there are a few things we can say with relative certainty. For one, almost certainly, there are more than three of them. And they were probably not kings. It’s a reminder for us that Christmas songs are fun to sing, but they should always be compared with the biblical text if we want to learn theology from them.

The biblical text says they are wise men, not kings. It is a loose term to refer to men who are interested in dreams, astronomy, astrology, and magic. But it is also a term that is used of the counselors to kings. And while they are from the west of Israel (they see the star in the east), they are probably not from the Orient. Most likely, they are from the Persia area or even from Babylon. That’s most likely because they come into Jerusalem with some knowledge of the ways of the Jewish people. They know that there is to be born a king of the Jews. It is probably that they received this knowledge through the teachings of Daniel and the people of Israel as they are exiled there years prior.

Being advisors to a king and being men who studied stars or astrology, something happens to move them to pick up from their land and travel a great distance to search for a baby. They claim that they have seen “His star” when it rose and so they have come to worship Him. I cannot even tell you how much speculation there is about this star. There are some people who claim that what they saw was a supernova—an exploding star in space. There are others that claim
what they saw is the alignment of the planets Jupiter and Saturn that formed the sign of a fish, which of course, we all know as the ancient symbol for Christianity (seriously, people say this). Still, others claim that it was a comet; maybe Haley’s Comet that they saw which led them to believe it was something special and brought them to Jerusalem.

These are all very interesting thoughts, but I just have to think that it is simply something supernatural that they see. These are men who study stars as their job and for them to see something that moves them to come to Jerusalem, seeking the King of the Jews, based upon a star, I thinking it would have to be something pretty special, don’t you think? I mean, why Jerusalem? Why Israel? We do not know exactly what it is, but it must be something very unique that leads them directly to this great city.

Add into this fact that in vs. 9, after their interaction with Herod, we are told that as they go to leave for Bethlehem, the star appears again, directing them to the place where the child is. That means that the star is there and then gone and then reappears again. Supernatural. And honestly, I would never leave out the possibility that it very well come have been something supernatural that only they see! We never see another person in the story mention or being intrigued by the star like these men. It sure seems as though God directs their paths to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem in order to worship Jesus. Their story is a special one of God drawing them in a very special way to worship His son. It is God winning their worship for them.

And of course, let’s not miss the point that there is in their hearts, some connection or yearning or longing for a true king. They come looking for the One who has been born the king of the Jews. I think their wording is very intentional for us as we seek to understand something about Jesus. Jesus is born the King of the Jews; He is not born to become the King of the Jews. His kingly status is known from the very beginning. The little baby in the manger is not to become King; He is King! It only makes sense that they are not looking to worship someone they hope will one day become King. They travel this long distance to pay homage to the One who is the King. They long to bow down to the feet of a baby to worship Him. But not everyone is as excited as they are for this possibility.

Vs. 3–6 → When they come into the city, there is a buzz in the marketplace. There must have been a large enough entourage with
these wise men that when they finally make it to the capital city of Jerusalem and they ask these questions about the child born king of the Jews, people begin to talk. So much so that we are told that King Herod hears what they are asking.

Herod is now very old in life. He is toward the end of his life. And all of a sudden, some men come entering town asking where the King of the Jews has been born. He knows they are not speaking of any of his sons, so this troubles him. He is very concerned about losing his throne. And the people know that when Herod is troubled, everyone is going to be troubled. I can just imagine the commoner on the street talking to the wise men as they enter town and say, “Dude, I would be very careful asking those kind of questions around here. Those kind of questions can get you killed.”

When Herod hears this question, he obviously wants to know the answer. He calls a meeting with two of the major religious groups in Israel in order to get a comprehensive answer. He calls the chief priests, who are the Sadducees. And he calls the scribes of the people to the meeting. These are the teachers of the Jewish law, the Pharisees. They are not friends with each other, but they both know the answer to the question. Their conclusion is that the Messiah, the Christ, is to be born in Bethlehem of Judea. They know this because of Micah 5:2.

Which, by the way, raises some very interesting questions . . . namely, if they know this and they hear of some crazy situations of a baby born in Bethlehem, why don’t they seek it out to know whether it is true or not. That part just doesn’t make sense, unless you understand that their religion is more about them than about the coming Messiah. It’s more about their control of the people than it is about pointing to someone greater than them. And that’s what it is.

Bethlehem is not a famous city. There is nothing glamorous about the city. That is probably why when the wise men see the star and think about the King of the Jews being born, they automatically think he will be born in the world-class city of Jerusalem. Nope, Bethlehem. Dumpy. Rural. Unimportant. It’s like instead of being born in New York or Chicago, your born in Youngstown. No? Well, then maybe Warren. There’s just not much exciting about that town. For Bethlehem, there is nothing that is worthwhile about that city except of course, the fact that the King of the Universe is born there. Now that Herod has the answer to his question, he devises a plan.
Vs. 7–8  He brings the wise men to him in a private meeting. He wants to know from them as to the timing of their vision of the star. To the wise men, they would have thought nothing about this request. We only think of it as a big deal because we know what is going to happen next in the text. Herod simply wants to know because he has a plan to get rid of the King of the Jews.

After getting the information from them that he wants, he sends them to Bethlehem on a mission. He wants them to find the child for him and then to come report back to him where they found him. The reason why he told them is because he too wanted to go and worship the child. Of course, we know he is lying. But he must have been a good liar because he appears to have been able to trick the wise men.

As Herod sends them away, he would have had no reason to think they would not have come back to him, fulfilling his request. That is, except the fact that God intervenes. And so they go to complete the purpose of their long journey to worship a baby!

Vs. 9–12  As they go to leave Jerusalem, the star once again appears and leads them right to the place where the child is. They are overjoyed. Deliriously happy. When I read about their joy in vs. 10, I immediately think of a child on a gift-filled Christmas morning. I don’t know what your Christmases are like or how they were when you were a child. But I always remember not being able to sleep the night before. And then I would finally fall asleep, only to wake up early in the morning to wake my parents up. They would make my sister and I sit on the stairs to the downstairs before we could make our way down. They wanted a picture (I hope my parents don’t still have those).

But we would go downstairs and we were overjoyed. We rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. I remember one time when JT was four years old, he got one present called a “bulls-eye bounce and roll.” And all he could say all morning was, “I can’t believe I got a bulls-eye bounce and roll” with the largest grin on his face. He was so excited. He rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. That’s Ralphie’s response when he finally gets his red rider bb gun.

But for these wise men, their joy bubbles up inside of them because the star once again is showing them how to get to the baby so they can worship Him. Just think of that. We will talk about the gifts they give in a minute, but they are rejoicing exceedingly with great joy that they have the opportunity to worship to this baby; to give gifts to this baby!
And let’s not just interpret this as if their great joy is just like a parent on Christmas morning who can’t wait to give their gifts because their kids are going to be so excited. I have some pretty cool gifts to give to my kids on Christmas this year. It’s going to be fun and I’m going to take great joy in giving them.

But there is one really big difference in the joy they have in giving their worship to Jesus than my giving gifts to my children. They are giving these gifts in worship to a baby, who cannot and will not respond. Listen, I know it’s baby Jesus. I know He is fully God. But He is also fully man. What I mean is I don’t think they are so fully excited to give the gifts because this baby is going to turn to them and utter his first words to these wise men! “Why Thank You. And May You Be Blessed Forevermore.” NO. Of course not. That’s silly.

The baby isn’t going to even know that they give these gifts. Jesus is not going to know that they even show up. There’s absolutely nothing they get in return for this worship. Nothing. There’s absolutely no quid pro quo here. Yet, they give these gifts feeling like the children on Christmas morning. How do you get there?

Could it be that they realize the gifts they bring are nothing compared to the gift that the child already is to them? Could it be that they have a sense of God’s mercy and grace drawing them to this little house in this dumpy town hundreds, maybe thousands, of miles from their hometown, to worship a baby? Could it be that they sense God working through this baby born the King of the Jews to secure their worship? Could it be that years before Paul wrote Romans, they understand the “mercies of God” as the foundation that leads to presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice to the One who is glorious!

I mean, the star leads them to the house. Whether it hangs over the house or simply over Bethlehem, we do not know. But apparently, they are able to find the child. When they enter the house, they find the child with Mary and they fall down and worship. And who do they worship? Not Mary. Mary isn’t worthy of worship. They are not there to worship Mary. The star doesn’t appear to draw them in to worship Mary. They are there to fall down and worship the baby boy named Jesus. They fall down to worship King Jesus.

It is only after we are told of their worship that we are told of the gifts they bring, which means that the gifts are some unimportant to the worship they give. And yet, giving gifts was customary when
approaching someone superior to you. Again, there is much speculation about these gifts. Many people read into them and try to spiritualize them. The first gift is Gold! This is the gift that is often given to royalty. Read about King Solomon and you will learn that whenever people visited him, they would bring gold. It is considered the King’s metal. And that makes sense, after all, they do come into Israel looking for a king . . . the King of the Jews.

The second gift is Frankincense. Some of your translations may just say incense. It is an odorous gum that comes from the bark of some local trees. It is used as a medicine, but it is also used in the offerings of sacrifices to God at the temple. Because of this, some people seem to think that this gift is to represent that the wise men know they are worshipping God. That’s possible; after all, they are drawn there by supernatural occurrence.

The third gift is Myrr. This is a very strange gift to bring to a baby. It is a valuable spice and perfume that is primarily used in the embalming process after death in order to preserve the body. Like I said, a strange gift to give to a baby. But because of that, some people read into this gift that the wise men are looking forward to the death and burial of King Jesus. This may be a stretch.

So, what are we to make of these gifts? It is fun to think of them as representing a King who is Deity who is going to die, but I would warn us to not over spiritualize them. The truth of the matter is that the wise men do bring simple, expensive, and valuable items with them. They bring these things to the King and the point we should see the most is that these things cost them dearly. They are sacrificing their best for King Jesus. In fact, if you read the next section in Matthew, you will discover that Joseph and Mary are forced to flee Israel to go to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. It is probably these sacrificial gifts given by these wise men that fund the trip which saves the life of Jesus.

But I think more than the gifts they give, we should see that they give themselves. They give themselves in worship to a king. A baby king. The One they believe to be king. And this is worship as we have understood it over the past several weeks. It is offering yourself as a living sacrifice. And it is impossible to really study this without thinking of the connection of faith and worship. One author has said . . .

“They saw no miracles to convince them. They heard no teaching to persuade them. They saw nothing but a new-born infant, helpless and
weak, and needing a mother’s care like any one of ourselves. And yet when they saw that infant, they believe that they saw the divine Saviour of the world! ‘They fell down and worshipped him.’”

What did their worship look like? We don’t know exactly what they do, but we know some of the characteristics of it. For one thing, it isn’t easy. Their worship is consumed by their self-denial, which is never easy. They give up their comfort in their own country to search him out. Traveling in those days was not like it is today. It would have been long and hard. But they were destined to find him.

Maybe that’s a good question to ask ourselves this Christmas season. A very personal question. What has following Jesus cost you? That is a question that must be asked in prosperous America. It might get worse for us someday, probably already starting too, but for the majority of people that come to follow and worship Jesus, it costs them nothing. Worship is just convenient, and when it isn’t, well, then it can be put on hold. My prayer is that the account of these wise men may stir our hearts this Christmas season to remember that it isn’t about us. It’s about the worship of a baby, who grows into a man, who lives a perfect life and dies the death that we deserve . . . and why? To win our worship for Him!

Jesus came so that we would give up of ourselves. He came so that we would stop taking ourselves so seriously. He came so that we can trust Him with everything. He came so that we could bow at His feet and worship Him. Let’s do it this year.

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