

Teaching the Way of Love

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Tis the Season to Receive

How we receive gifts is just as important as how we give them. This lesson was driven home to me as I experienced the difference between how my wife's family celebrated Christmas and my family's tradition. My wife's family tends to form their family traditions around practical considerations, such as impatient children, efficient use of time, and the patience of adults. For Christmas gift opening, gifts are distributed amidst the excited clamor of the children. Then everyone tears into the wrapping paper at the same time. The children open their presents within minutes, adults quickly clean up the wrapping paper, and the children disappear to continue playing and roughhousing. The conversation among the adults turns briefly toward which child received which gift from which relative, tracking down the gifts for each child and putting them together so they find their way home. Then the adults return to the kitchen to play cards and enjoy dessert. The pace is fast and furious. The environment is full of energy and excitement, and it is all over quickly.

My family's Christmas tradition couldn't be more different. After a Christmas eve dinner of our favorite junk food, we gather around the Christmas tree in the living room. The gifts are distributed and piled up around each family member in an atmosphere of quiet anticipation. Then we take turns opening our presents one person at a time and one gift at a time. After each present opens a present, he or she shows it to everyone and thanks the giver. We take turns going around the room this way, opening one gift at a time until every present is opened. This tradition gives my mother's sense of humor plenty of opportunity to express itself. She loves to nest carefully wrapped boxes inside each other and cheerfully enforce the rule that you can only open one box at a time. We wonder who will receive the trick boxes each year or what variation Mom will devise. The entire process takes hours.

You would think our children would become impatient with the slow, methodical process of waiting their turn. Surprisingly, my kids tend to prefer the tradition of my family over my wife's. The entire family appreciates every gift. The focus is not only on what is received but on the people involved in the exchange. The recipient fully appreciates the giver. My children have many fond memories of being the subject of my mother's sense of humor and returning the favor to her. Last year we sent her on a scavenger hunt to find each of her gifts. I think this slow, intentional gift exchange method has some important lessons to teach us.

The best gift exchange happens when both the giving and the receiving are honored. If one of these elements is not recognized, the exchange becomes marginalized. Focusing only on the receiving makes us appear selfish and grasping. If we focus only on the giving, the event can become prideful, and we can appear ungrateful for the gifts received.

I think you will agree that we tend to spend more time getting ready to give gifts than we do to receive them. We make lists, check them twice, and enter the hustle and bustle of consumerism for the best deals.

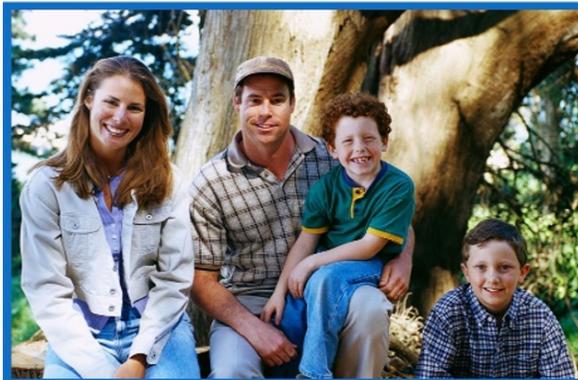
We wrap and adorn purchases with bows and tags. We put work and effort into our gift-giving. But what are we doing to prepare ourselves to be great receivers of gifts?

Great reception begins with the understanding that all gifts express love and the gift of yourself. Your reception should acknowledge the person first and the gift second. Even if the gift is not what you want or were expecting, it is vital to recognize the love expressed. Reception is also about taking the time to attend to the exchange fully. Engage the person who is giving the gift. Ask them how they came up with the idea for the gift. Let them know how you will use it. What you say and how you say it is your gift back to the giver. Anticipation is also part of receiving well. Patience breeds gratitude and keeps selfishness at bay. It helps you focus on the true spirit of the exchange rather than on what you are getting. Patience reduces one's sense of entitlement and increases one's appreciation.

These are essential lessons to practice but also to teach our children. When our children are young, we teach them to say, "Thank you." That's a great start. As children get older, continue discussing the value of receiving gifts well. Challenge them to become better receivers. Help them to see the love behind the presents they receive. Show them how to approach the giver of the gift as a gift themselves. Guide them to say more than just the expected "thank you" by discussing what it means to make your gratitude heartfelt and authentic.

Gift-giving is an exchange of love. Jesus, the perfect gift, was the gift of self to humanity, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Uniting His divine nature with our human nature, He gave Himself to us in the perfect gift of intimacy. Jesus gave up His divine power and embraced humility. He continued to be a gift of self to us on the Cross when He perfectly offered Himself to us in death. Christmas is complete when we recognize that giving and receiving gifts point to the ultimate Gift of Christ. Can you remember this when you exchange gifts this Christmas?

*This newsletter series is brought to you by Alice Heinzen and Jeff Arrowood, creators of **Teaching the Way of Love**. **Teaching the Way of Love** is designed to help you become a faithful, joyful and confident parent. Visit www.twl4parents.com for more strategies on how to become the best parent you can be. Consider becoming an annual member of the **Teaching the Way of Love** program. Members receive practical and timely parenting resources. Go to twl4parents.com/membership for more information.*



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