

Keys to Graceful Giving

"Grace", in Christian terms, is the ultimate gift. It is something given freely, not earned. It has no ulterior motive. It is selfless. It cannot be bought or bargained for by the recipient. Grace is a force more powerful and more loving than any feeble human emotion, need or want.

Grace lies at the heart of every true gift. If grace is present, the humblest gift warms and ennobles, creates and expresses love. Without grace, even the costliest gift is cold and heartless.

But you can't give with grace if you're thinking of yourself first! Or if your gift comes with strings attached, or sends a mixed message to the recipient. There's no grace in the coerced gift, the I-don't-want-to-but-it's-expected gift, the gift that is designed to nudge the recipient in some vital way.

When we ask our children to give, do we teach them to give with grace? Or is it merely, as it seems to be for this family, a learning experience purchased with old toys--without the slightest thought for the comfort, the embarrassment, the feelings of the other child to the transaction?

How do we teach our children to give? To give in the spirit of grace, to reflect the love which has been poured out so generously upon us?

Give year-round

First, we need to bring giving into our lives all year long. During the holiday season, it is easy to share our good fortune. Food drives, bell ringers, charity functions help us remember the needs of others.

People are hungry the other 364 days of the year! Do our children see us model charity and giving from January through November? If not, what message are we sending them: that hunger and pain and misery only exist at Christmas? That we should only respond to this need only at Christmas time?

Make giving real

Second, we need to make giving real to our children. Best strategy: get them involved.

One effective method for school-aged children is the popular Angel Tree ministry or similar outreach efforts sponsored by many churches and

charitable organizations. A family sponsors a child of designated age and sex, buying gifts and clothing for delivery by the charity.

When my sons were younger, our family sponsored boys of the same ages. My sons did the shopping for our "angels". It makes giving very, very real when a child chooses to buy his angel the radio-controlled car he hopes to find under his own tree! Do take a picture of the wrapped "angel" gifts and the young givers. Your children will not forget that shopping trip.

Now that my children are older, our family focuses on the age group that languishes on the tree: teenagers. Everybody loves to buy toys for a three-year-old, but needy teens need love, too--and hats and Walkmans and hand-held video games. Explain to your children why you have chosen those last few forlorn tags. They will understand the love you express when you make sure that even no-longer-cuddly children have a holiday gift, too.

Give in secret

Third, make sure your right hand doesn't know what your left hand is doing. Jesus, a great teacher, exposed the fallacy of the ostentatious giver, whose abundant charity depends upon whether anyone is watching.

Give in secret, and tell your children why: it is no gift when we expect gratitude, appreciation, or attach strings to our offerings. We give, instead, to relieve need; to share the abundance with which we've been blessed; and to reflect to others the good that we find in the world. Giving with grace is reward enough!

A few Christmases ago, I roped my eldest child, then 14, into a left hand/right hand deal. I was coordinating a church food box program for 120 families and a toy drive for homeless children. My giving time and my giving dollars were stretched as far as they could go.

Then I met a family that challenged me to give more. There were eight children all told, and two single mothers living on the edge. I felt burdened to see to it that they received more than the standard turkey dinner provided by our food box program.

My son and I put our heads together. Could we shop very carefully with our Advent money, and somehow find a way to bring Christmas to this family?

We could, and we did. We checked the sale flyers and found a sale on the types of toys we wanted. A neighbor (of limited means, himself) heard of our

challenge, and contributed \$20 on the spot. We tightened the belt on our grocery budget, and found a way to send gifts for all and some much-needed cash to this family.

But we never met them. We never burdened them with our need for praise, for thanks, for appreciation. We packed everything into a box and saw to it that it was delivered along with their food basket.

My child and I remember that Christmas as one of our most joyous. Our gift was not thanks or gratitude or "aren't-you-wonderful!" Our gift was knowing that somewhere in our city, eight children were enjoying new toys, and two burdened mothers had their loads lifted, just a bit, when they didn't expect it. In a word, grace--but **we** were the recipients of the blessing.

Allow your children to sacrifice

Finally, give your children the chance to experience sacrifice in order to give. Even a small sacrifice on their part will reinforce a lesson on giving more than any other factor.

Our family's Advent traditions focus on sacrifice. Each of us chooses an Advent discipline: some act or duty that will save money in our household. Even a three-year-old can be "light monitor"; turning off the household lights when no one is in the room. My eldest, the year she was eight, chose to make my lunch each day (and her offerings both saved money and helped me lose weight!).

Parents choose a discipline, too, like giving up lunches out. The entire family can agree to give up dessert or forego movie rentals in Advent as a family discipline.

In the center of our Advent wreath, we keep a little jar. Each night at dinner, we light the Advent candles and report in on our discipline. Has the light monitor turned off the lights? A quarter goes in the jar. Did Mommy eat her peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich instead of a restaurant lunch? That's another \$4. As Advent progresses, the jar fills with the tangible results of our sacrifices. This fund pays for our holiday giving.

To make the lesson real, let the children take the whole jar--pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and all--to the store to pay for the "angel" gifts. Each coin stands for one small act of sacrifice, one little selfless step to help others. Salesmen will cringe when they see you coming, but your children will see the direct connection between their little sacrifices and their ability to give.

And they'll do it without having to hand an old toy to another child.