

Movie Message: The Ultimate Gift
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
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St. John United Methodist church
Anchorage, Alaska
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Today's movie is The Ultimate Gift. I had not watched this film prior to choosing it for this day. This was due to the fact that many in the church highly recommended it. It is a story with themes of life and death, pride and humility, and greed and generosity. Red Stevens was a wealthy patriarch who has died, leaving in his wake a collection of unsatisfied siblings and extended family members who did not get what they thought they deserved.

Red's grandson, Jason, has grown up with money. Not surprisingly, he is self-centered and materialistic. But his grandfather saw something in him, and so he devised a plan before his death to offer Jason several gifts. To get Jason to cooperate he was told that he had to follow the directions with these gifts in order to receive his inheritance. With each gift Jason would go to Red's lawyer or a personal video device to watch another clip of Red's directions.

The first gift Red gives to Jason was the gift of hard work. He arranged for Jason to fly to a Texas ranch to spend a month with Gus, an old friend. In this scene Jason refuses to get out of bed until he gets a shocking wake up call.

Video Clip 15:45 – 16:34

Do you know the value of hard work? Sometimes I wonder what will happen to the work ethic of our country as we lose our Depression Era generation. It is said that there are three kinds of workers. When a piano is to be moved, the first kind gets behind and pushes, the second pulls and guides, and the third grabs the piano stool. When there is hard work, not necessarily physical work, which kind of worker are you? Some would say there are more people grabbing the piano stool than those willing to get behind and push.

So Jason finally relents and sets hundreds of fence poles on the ranch. Now he expects his inheritance. But wait, there are more "gifts." Through the video Red tells Jason he has one month to find a true friend. He thinks this will be easy until he discovers that his apartment and bank accounts have been emptied. Jason is broke and his girlfriend abandons him. He is homeless and forced to sleep on a park bench. Then he meets Emily and her mother, Alexi. Emily agrees to be his friend and Jason takes her and Alexi to Mr. Hamilton, Red's lawyer.

Video Clip 37:17 – 38:29

The third gift Red wants Jason to learn is the value of money. Do you remember when you learned this important life lesson? Money represents so much: time, effort, and hard work. I believe children need to earn some money so they can learn how to manage it. It's much easier to learn the lessons that come with losing \$5 than \$500.

So Jason is given \$1500 from his work on the ranch. He then finds Alexi's purse in the park and sees a \$1600 medical bill which he pays. It is this action that

leads Jason to the hospital where he learns that Emily has leukemia. In the chapel Jason listens to Emily's thoughts and fears about death.

Video Clip 46:14 – 56:24

Emily hates the very idea of death and she is right to feel that way. Despite its inevitability, deep in our hearts we know that death is unnatural and wrong. When people we love pass away, the sense of sorrow we feel is part of this recognition. Separation from loved ones is painful but we were not meant for such separation. We were made for eternity.

Do you ever forget this truth? Are we so conditioned that death is a part of life that we forget that we were not created to be separated from God? Do we understand that something is inherently wrong with this life? Fortunately, even Jason Stevens gets one thing right in this scene: the arms of Jesus, which seem to be reaching out to Emily, actually reach out to us all. God has made a way for us to escape the finality of death by placing our trust in God's Son.

The next gift is family. Red wants Jason to try to get something positive out of his dysfunctional family. Jason invites Alexi to his family's magnificent mansion where Red's family have gathered for Thanksgiving dinner. Things don't go very well.

Video Clip 54:21 – 56:24

Red Steven's extended family believed that once Red died all of his money would go to them. Lavishly taken care of their whole lives as a result of Red's generosity, they refuse to be grateful, instead choosing to become bitter and petty. Granted a chance to express gratitude, they decide to be grateful for the death of the very man whose wealth sustains them.

Gratitude is at the very heart of the gospel. God wants us to be thankful. The Apostle Paul, in teaching the Thessalonian church, specifically noted that giving thanks in everything is God's will for us. God wants us to recognize that God is the source of all good things. Thankfulness reminds us of who we are, and who God is.

The next gift from Red to his grandson is learning. Jason is flown to Ecuador to visit a small mountain village where Red established a library. When he arrives at the library he notices that there are hardly any books on the shelves. "Where are all the books?" The answer? "They are checked out." The people are reading them.

For years Jason blamed his grandfather for his father's death. He had perished in a plane crash on the mountain near the village. Jason wants to see the crash site but is warned that the mountain is controlled by a drug gang. One morning Jason jumps into a jeep and heads to the mountain. A local man who knew Red accompanies him.

They find the plane wreckage and Jason is moved by the site. Suddenly they are kidnapped by the drug gang and imprisoned. For several weeks Jason wallows on the dirt floor of a tiny cell.

Have you ever had the experience of hitting the bottom of life? Do you know what it feels like to have most of the props in your life jerked away from you? If a doctor tells you that you have only a year to live what is it that will hold you up? If a dear family member dies how will you find the strength to move on with your life?

Jason eventually escapes and returns to the US. Poring through old letters his grandfather had written him but he had never opened, Jason learns the truth about the

death of his father. It wasn't Red, but his father who had impetuously flown in bad weather and crashed into the mountain.

The next gift is one which Jason wants to give Emily. He arranges for a special Christmas for Emily and her mother and flies them to Gus' ranch in Texas. Gus has trucked in snow for the occasion and had their home decorated with Christmas lights.

Video Clip 1:27:09 – 1:28:57

Have you ever thought that one of the purposes of a meaningful life is to help others realize their dreams? Jason is finally getting it. He is being transformed from a life centered on himself and his pleasure to one that helps others. He had always thought that the purpose of life was to have fun.

How many people today believe that the purpose of life is to have fun? Everyone likes to have fun but is fun the center of the cake or the frosting on the outside? It's interesting to note that the root of the word, "fun," means "to be a fool." It is more important to God that you and I love than to have fun. And love is not always easy. Love is not selfish, and it gets messy, and sometimes it hurts so terribly much.

Let's watch as Jason and Emily talk about Emily's dream of that Christmas day riding horses.

Video Clip 1:30:51 – 1:32:46

Jason returns to Mr. Hamilton's law firm and is given \$100 million dollars of Red's inheritance. Immediately he begins planning a special hospital he calls Emily's House. He uses all of the \$100 million to get the project started. The time has come for Emily to die and I will spare you this scene.

In the end Jason is awarded Red's entire estate worth over \$2 billion dollars. But this is not the ultimate gift. It is the gift of selfless love, of pride transformed into humility, of resentment melted by forgiveness. Jason receives his final video message from his grandfather.

Video Clip 1:45:20 – 1:46:59

What legacy do you want to leave your family? The good news is that you and I don't have to wait until we die to arrange for an ultimate gift to those we love. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we can be transformed by the love of God. We can see our lives changed for the better. We can have eternal life through faith in Christ. And we can be disciples of Christ and help others realize the dream of a selfless life.