

## *Greetings!*

"It's the thought that counts, not the gift." We laughed, as they looked down at what was obviously a joke wrapped in pretty paper with a bow. All of us have been there, either on the receiving side, or on the giving end of things.

I hate gift cards, but I love them as well. Bipolar you say. Think about it. I love getting them because I can go get what I want (usually from Bass Pro), but they take little to no thought from the giver.

One word best describes our lives this time of year, "rush". Pressured to find that perfect gift for someone, we grab our sales flier and off to the store we run to buy that "perfect gift" which just happens to be 60% off (sale ends Saturday). If it just so happens they're sold out, Wal-Mart carries a large selection of gift cards that is sure to please anyone.

So, how often has a gift you've either received or given, really affected you?

## *The Gift*

I was eight when we were on our way to the family Christmas gathering at Grandma Taylor's house in Thomasville, Georgia. We had just one quick stop to make at my uncle's house before leaving Tallahassee. As my aunt handed me my first gift of the season, I was ecstatic. Mom soon brought me back to reality with, "You can't open it until Christmas."

At Grandma's the house was full! Kids in every corner, adults trying to talk over the noise and more confusion than you can shake a stick at, as we say back home. Finally, the big moment arrived. An uncle called out each kid's name as the paper began to fly. Squealing with excitement, we showed off our toys as if rating each one on a scale of 1-10 when we noticed him. Standing by his mother was my cousin Kirk in the early stages of a good cry. Somehow, in the confusion of so many kids to buy for, he had been overlooked.

The whispering began as aunts and uncles blamed each other when Mama called me to the side. "Go get the present from Uncle Dewy and Aunt Smitty and bring it here." With mixed emotions, I retrieved the yet unopened Christmas gift from the car telling myself that it was going to a good cause. "Look here's Kirk's present. It got misplaced over here." I watched eagerly to see what I was about to give up. Wiping tears from his eyes, he opened the gift and lit up as he showed me his new plastic saucer that spun on top of a sharply pointed stick (We didn't think much of toy safety in those days.). Mom quietly promised me that she would buy me another one (she never did) as aunts and uncles patted me on the back for my sacrifice. Kirk never knew he had been overlooked.

Several years ago, at an early age, Kirk passed away. As I attended his funeral, I remembered that night at Grandma Taylor's with a grateful heart for a gift that was given, received and then given away again.

His name is Bill Wilson. He's quite the character. Bill is 61 years old and pastors the world's largest Sunday School in Brooklyn, New York, called Metro Ministries. Each week, Pastor Bill sits behind the wheel of a school bus as he collects kids from all across the city to attend Sunday School at Metro. The longhaired children's pastor reaches over 42,000 children at 200 sites around the city.

This is the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Operation Holiday Hope where Metro Ministries will give out wrapped gifts to orphans and needy children. In 2008, Operation Holiday Hope gave out over 90,000 gifts around the world. Of those 29,700 were given out in New York City alone. During the 2008 holidays, they served over 30,000 meals in South Africa, 21,000 in the Philippines and countless other gifts and meals across the globe. Bill and those working with him, have literally saved thousands of children from destruction over the years.

Why does he do this? Let's start with where Bill will spend Christmas Eve night and into Christmas day this year. You won't find him at Metro or anywhere else, passing out gifts or serving a meal. You will find Bill sitting on a park bench in St. Pete, Florida, remembering.

Bill was 12 years old when his mother sat him on the same bench and said, "I can't do this anymore." She never returned. Bill sat on the bench for three days without a meal, or anyone stopping to ask him if they could help, until a Christian man named David Rudenis asked, "Are you okay?" Even though David's own son was lying in a hospital bed dying from leukemia, Bill found himself, moments later, taken in by the Rudenis family.

"I am the pastor of the largest Sunday school in the world. Why? Because one man, out of his own need, with his own family and their own drama, but still, he still chooses to stop and pick me up, and he put something in motion," he said through tears in a recent Fox News interview. "That's why I do what I do."

Bill said of David Rudenis, "He put something in motion."

"It's the thought that counts, not the gift."

I wonder.

***And that's just a thought . . .***

**Metro Ministries (Bill Wilson) \_**  
<http://www.metroministries.org/index.php>

## *My Final Word*

We rolled into the Giant Supermarket parking lot to pick up some things before our Christmas festivities when Mama told me to wait a minute. Taking her checkbook out of her purse (no small feat for a purse the size of a small suitcase), she wrote out a check. I glanced to see what she was up too when I saw that it was for a rather large amount, more than I thought she could afford, but who was I to tell her what to give.

As we passed the bell ringer, who stood shivering in the cold, she dropped the folded check into his hanging red pot. They smiled at each other as he thanked her without ever missing a single ding from his little bell. Taking out a tissue, she wiped the tears from her eyes as we turned to go inside the warm store.

I wasn't unaccustomed to Mama's yearly gift to the Salvation Army; it was her moment to remember. During World War II, Dad served in the Navy on a battle cruiser in the Pacific. His letters home at Christmas time reflected his loneliness and desire to be with his family as he shared his thoughts with Mama. Though he would be away from home on that particular Christmas Eve, he and some friends would be spending it at the Salvation Army Christmas gathering. Good food, gifts, music and a friendly atmosphere for a Christian man away from his family at Christmas, helped him get through the night.

"It's the thought that counts, not the gift." We could argue the point from now until next Christmas, however, I've observed that there are gifts, and then there are "gifts". How do you measure which one is which? It's the effect created by the gift that gives it value.

Mary said to the angel, "Let it be according to your word.", and thus she gave her womb (her gift) that the greatest gift ever given could step into our world. A measureless gift, changing lives as it reverberates down through history.

Is it the thought, or the gift? Maybe it's both.

*Wishing you a blessed Christmas,*

Chris

**P.S. Bass Pro gift cards accepted!**

