

A Greedy Christmas

Philippians 2:6-8

Do you know how many shopping days til Christmas? I don't either. I hope it's enough to do all the shopping I need to do. What a drag! It's so tiring, and boring. Then there's the decorating and baking and wrapping and visitors and church services. Christmas is such an exhausting time of year. The best part is when it's all over, don't you agree? Finally you can get all this stuff out of the way and get back to normal life. You can relax in front of the TV in the evening without having to go shopping or to church. You can watch your favorite TV show or whatever, because your time is your own, and you don't have to be bothered by the nuisance of other people.

Seriously, Christmas *is* a busy, tiring season. And although it might sound a bit shocking to say so during a Christmas program, I have personally heard people say on more than one occasion they wished it was over. There is no doubt that life is easier after Christmas. So why do we do it? Why do we go to all this bother? Why wear ourselves out with this program and this meal today? Why do we allow visitors to disturb us, and why do we spend so much time, money, and effort to buy presents for each other?

One reason we celebrate Christmas is to keep up appearances. We would be a public embarrassment or disgrace if we just stayed home and didn't give presents – so we go through the motions to preserve our public image. Related to this is the reality that our family, friends and relatives would be very unhappy with us if we didn't celebrate Christmas – and the rest of the year might be unpleasant for us as a result. So we pay our dues to the holiday to get more agreeable relatives. Some of us celebrate Christmas because it's a tradition, and we really like traditions. It makes us feel secure and significant to play these seasonal roles every year.

You get the impression, though, that the couple in our play celebrated Christmas because they really enjoyed it. Look at them. They went to all the bother to go shopping for a gift they didn't bring home, and even spent the money without getting the gift! Furthermore, they did all this for the benefit of an oily con man who deserved to spend Christmas Day in the comfort of the local jail. And to cap it all off, he didn't even thank them or show any appreciation for their pains. To our way of thinking, this was a quadruple waste of time! Amazingly, while they could have done something so much more fun with their time, they actually seemed to enjoy themselves on this fool's errand.

Our play featured two entirely different types of people, each celebrating Christmas in his own way. Greedy was taking advantage of the season to enhance his own wealth. He was completely focused on this, and excused his mistreatment of others by appealing to this higher good. The couple were using the season as an occasion to do good to others. They were giving rather than taking. They gave thought, time, and money to Greedy because they wanted to do something good for him. Greedy thought only of himself, but the couple thought only of others.

Which are you? Are you thinking only of yourself this Christmas, or are you thinking of others? Are you thinking mostly of the presents you will get, or are you thinking mostly of how to bless others with carefully chosen gifts? Are you trying to decorate as little as possible, or do you hope to make the house merry for your family and friends? Moms and dads, are you complaining about all the hard work you are doing for the holiday, or are you pleased for the opportunity to make others happy? Kids, are you looking forward to the end of school so you can play video games and play with your friends, or are you planning to help Mom and Dad with holiday chores? Who are you thinking about this Christmas, yourself or others?

It's easy in all the hustle of the holiday to forget why we celebrate it at all. We forget that we give

presents to others because at Christmas God gave us the best present we will ever get. At Christmas God gave us His most prized possession, His Son – and we celebrate that astounding gift by giving gifts to others. Our effort to please others is a mere shadow of the sacrifice God made in sending Jesus to us. God’s attitude is captured in Philippians 2:6-8.

[Jesus] being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Jesus did not belong on earth. His rightful place was with His Father in glory. But He did not demand His rights. He gave up the pleasure of heaven and came to earth. The Westminster Shorter Catechism expresses well the humiliation Jesus experienced by coming to earth.

Q. Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist? A. Christ's humiliation consisted in his being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time. (WSC 27)

Why do we expend so much energy celebrating Christmas? Christ is our example. Just as He came to give Himself to us, so on the occasion of His coming we give ourselves to others. The couple in our play demonstrated the true Christmas spirit because they acted like Christ in thinking of others. So we ought to have a joyful heart as we occupy our thoughts with pleasing others at Christmas.

But there’s a problem with these warm-hearted thoughts. The problem is that, in spite of this clever play and the word of God, none of us really *wants* to think of others first. Even the best of us, the most holy of us, are selfish at our core. Perhaps this afternoon you are inspired to serve others, but I tell you that by Monday night your noble intentions will be buried in selfish annoyance, resentment, anger, and greed. Every one of us is truly Greedy, and no inspirational homily will change that.

So now we come to the central reason for Jesus’ coming. The play didn’t explain this, but the core significance of Jesus’ coming was to change us from Greedy to holy. That’s what it means that Jesus is our Savior. He saves us from a life of sin, and makes us holy like Himself. This gives us real confidence that we can successfully, joyfully give ourselves to others during all the stress and fatigue of the holiday season. And His wonderful salvation is the well-spring of our joy.

This advent season as we prepare to celebrate the coming of our Savior, don’t settle for greediness. Determine to devote yourself to the joyful service of others. You can, with Christ’s help. Look to Him. Pray for Him to change your heart, give you holy thoughts, and demonstrate His love in you. That’s the best way to celebrate Christmas.

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