

December 18, 2016

## “The Traditions of Christmas: Gifts”

Matthew 2:1-12

**FCF:** Our struggle with gift giving at Christmas

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus.

(magnet) It is good and right that we should give gifts.

### SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

In 1954, C. S. Lewis published an essay titled “Xmas and Christmas: A Lost Chapter from Herodotus.” It is about certain winter customs on a fictional island ([READ quote](#)):

They also send gifts to one another, suffering the same things about the gifts as about the cards, or even worse. For every citizen has to guess the value of the gift which every friend will send to him so that he may send one of equal value, whether he can afford it or not. And they buy as gifts for one another such things as no man ever bought for himself. For the sellers, understanding the custom, put forth all kinds of trumpery, and whatever, being useless and ridiculous, they have been unable to sell throughout the year they now sell as an Exmas gift...

Now Lewis was no joyless Grinch. He was a long time participant and concerned observer.

Many of us would share the sentiment. We have an intuitive sense that there’s something right about giving gifts this time of year. But, at the same time, there’s something wrong in how it plays out. And that is certainly worth taking time for us to examine in light of the Scriptures.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON INTRODUCTION:

An Associated Press story from July 2005 ([READ While Shepherds Watched quote](#)):

First one sheep jumped to its death. Then another and another, then dozens more. Having left their herds to graze while they ate breakfast, stunned Turkish shepherds now watched as nearly 1,500 others leapt off the same cliff. The first 450 animals died under the billowy pile.

How did this happen? Two reasons. First, the sheep were allowed to wander onto the wrong trail. That was preventable. And, second, it is the curious behavior of sheep that, once one picks a trail, the rest simply follow the tail in front of them without any regard for the destination.

“Thanks, Richard. That was a cheery story. What does it have to do with Christmas?” I’m glad you asked. It’s not enough to follow tails, to go with the flow, to do something because it’s how we’ve always done it. We need a reason and rationale, some grounding, something that will enable us to then engage with our whole hearts as an expression of wonder and worship.

In this series on “The Traditions of Christmas,” we’ve been looking at the deep roots of contemplation, music and song, and lights. And now we’re considering the tradition of gifts. This is perhaps the most obvious of all in terms of overlap between the cultural and Christian celebrations. Here’s the thing. Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus. It is good and right that we should give gifts. How so? Let’s consider three things. First, our admiration for the tradition. Second, our imitation of the history. And, third, our appreciation of God’s supply.

### I. ADMIRATION FOR THE TRADITION

First, our admiration for the tradition. That is, a humble willingness to grant that there are some good things that have been handed down through the ages and are worth considering.

*A) Not Santa Claus*

1. Not dissing Santa

Here, we're not talking about Santa Claus. Please understand that I'm not dissing Santa like that crazy TX pastor in the shopping mall, assaulting people with his pseudo tidings of great joy.

2. But matter of emphasis

Santa is part of our cultural traditions. It's a matter of emphasis. How he is integrated into the season is something best left to parents who should then use great care as to how far to take it.

*B) But Saint Nicholas*

1. Historical figure

That said, the tradition I have in mind is not the mythological Santa Claus but the historical Saint Nicholas, a 4th century bishop in Myra (modern day Turkey). Here are some things we know about Nicholas. He was born into a wealthy Christian home. His parents died in a plague when he was young. He was raised by his uncle, the presiding bishop, in a monastery. Nicholas later trained for the priesthood and decided that he would give away the inheritance passed to him.

2. Historical event

Which takes us to an historical event in the life of this historical figure ([READ Wiki quote](#)):

In his most famous exploit, Nicholas aided a poor man who had three daughters, but could not afford a proper dowry for them. This meant that they would remain unmarried and probably, in absence of any other possible employment, would have to become prostitutes. Even if they did not, unmarried maidens in those days would have been assumed as being a prostitute. Hearing of the girls' plight, Nicholas decided to help them, but being too modest to help the family in public (or to save them the humiliation of accepting charity), he went to the house under the cover of night and threw three purses (one for each daughter) filled with gold coins through the window opening into the house.

One version has him throwing one purse for three consecutive nights. Another has him throwing the purses over a period of three years, each time the night before one of the daughters comes of age. Invariably, the third time the father lies in wait, trying to discover the identity of their benefactor. In one version the father confronts the saint, only to have Nicholas say it is not him he should thank, but God alone. In another version, Nicholas learns of the poor man's plan and drops the third bag down the chimney instead; a variant holds that the daughter had washed her stockings that evening and hung them over the embers to dry, and that the bag of gold fell into the stocking.

My point is that part of our gift-giving should include an admiration for the traditions.

*Application:*

How then might the gift giving of Saint Nicholas connect to our own? It serves as an encouragement to be indiscriminate. That is, to look beyond our circles to all spheres of need, willing to love and care for any and all made in God's image, burdened by the Fall's effects.

And to do so without any calculation, without any regard for personal gain or credit. Perhaps even going so far as to remain anonymous so the beneficiary can but give praise to God.

Christmas is about the coming of Jesus. It is good and right that we should give gifts.

## **II. IMITATION OF THE HISTORY**

With admiration for the traditions and then in imitation of the history. Which brings us to our text. Clearly, God has given us cases of exemplary individuals from which we can learn.

*A) Lord of All Creation*

Let me start with this star and how it points us to Jesus as the Lord of all creation.

1. His reign

Jesus' reign is shown to be over all the cosmos. The magi speak of this being "his star" and surely it was for they all are. Jesus is God's agent in the creating and sustaining of all things.

2. His redemption

His reign is over all the cosmos. As is His redemption. The salvation He brings is about more than just us. It includes everything. So this star is a herald of its king, the Lord of all creation.

*B) Lord of All Nations*

And Lord of all nations, as seen with the magi. Understand that, however many there were or however far they came or however they were guided, they are pointing us to Jesus.

1. His reign

His reign knows no borders. It's worth noting that Matthew begins his Gospel with the drawing of all nations by the birth of this king and he ends his Gospel with the sending of the Church to all nations with the news of this king. We see that in the last chapter ([READ Matthew 28:19-20](#)).

2. His redemption

So his reign knows no borders. And nor does His redemption. Like the star, the appearance of the magi is a foretaste of what is to come ([READ Revelation 5:9-10](#)). This is who the magi saw.

How did they respond? They were driven to Bethlehem and then to their knees. They left behind their comfort, careers, plans, families, and friends. Searching and risking, bowing and giving gifts suited for a king. Part of our gift giving should include imitation of the history.

*Application:*

What would that mean? Not just indiscriminate and without calculation but sacrificial and costly. Historians are pretty certain that our tradition of gift giving can be traced back to these events. Now granted, it's a circuitous path including pagan rituals, New Year's parties, the 12-Days of Christmas, historical events, and cultural shifts. Still, our giving is rooted in this.

Which is to say it should be patterned on theirs, a sacrificial generosity. It should be and can be. For this King has set us free from lives driven by simply the accumulation of material things. Christmas is about the coming of Jesus. It is good and right that we should give gifts.

### **III. APPRECIATION OF GOD'S SUPPLY**

Which brings us to the deepest root of all, the appreciation of God's supply. Put another way, what do we have with Christmas? Four gifts from heaven have been laid under our tree.

*A) Certainty*

1. Limits to the evidence

The first is certainty. Now we can know. Yes, the testimony of creation and the witness of our consciences are constant evidences of there being some sort of god. But what is He like?

2. Clarity has come

With Christmas, now we know. Clarity has come. The guessing is over. The verdict is in.

*B) Eternity*

1. Our instincts are right

So we have certainty. And eternity. That is, our instincts are right. There is a reason for the waiting and wondering, the searching and longing, the thirsting and hungering. It's true!

2. There really is more

There really is more to life than this life. The secular view really is profoundly mistaken.

*C) Dignity*

1. More than mere parts

We have certainty and eternity. And dignity. Christmas proves that we are more than just parts, more than the product of time plus chance. Our days are more than just meaningless moments.

2. Our eternal value

We have value - eternal, intrinsic, irreducible, inextinguishable value. Proven in who has come.

*D) Surety*

1. Love spoken

So we have certainty, eternity, dignity. And surety. Love has spoken. In the Scriptures, we have precious love letters, notes of affection, eternal vows, and faithful promises from God Himself.

2. Love shown

Love has spoken. And, with Christmas, love has shown. Immanuel, God with us, among us.

*Illustration:*

In his book, [A Different Christmas](#), Rico Tice tells this story ([READ quote](#)):

I have a friend who, when he had just started working in London, used his salary and all his savings to fly to Australia for the weekend. By the time he'd got through airport security in Sydney, he had five hours before he needed to check in for his return flight. Why did he make that journey? To see his girlfriend. What did all that effort say to that girl? I love you. I care about you. He could have sent a letter, but it would not have said as much. Instead, he gave himself. That said it all.

This is what Christmas brings, these gifts beneath the tree - certainty, eternity, dignity, and surety. Which provides the deepest root for our giving, the appreciation of God's supply.

*Application:*

My friends, do you know what this means? It means each gift you receive this Christmas can truly be taken as a physical tangible token of God's great eternal love for you. Each one.

And, because of such love, it means that each gift you give can be an extension of the overflow of the love He has poured over and into you with the sending of His precious Son.

Christmas is about the coming of Jesus. It is good and right that we should give gifts.

**CONCLUSION:**

Back to the benefits, the transformative effect of being grounded in the tradition of gift giving. It's no stretch to imagine a home transformed by sights and sounds of the season. But there's also the smells. Which brings me to the yule log. Times do change, years pass, and many of the old customs are lost. The yule log was actually one of the first Christmas family customs.

For some 700 years, English families would cut down a tree months before, drag it home to be dried and prepared for its celebratory 12-day burning. Rubbed with spices, rum, and wine, a smell emanated from the fire that would fill the house with an appealing aroma which would remind everyone of the spice gifts of the magi, the life Christ lived, and the death He died in our place. To burn that log was to transform the home, not only through its warmth but through the atmosphere it created. This was not just another log. It was integral to the celebration.

The tradition of giving gifts this time of year need not to be just an exchange of presents, a burdensome chore, or a time for merchants to sustain their businesses. There's something that can transform all that - grappling with the reason and rationale for our giving. It's like lighting a yule log in the fireplace and then letting it do its work. For the gifts are rooted in our admiration of the tradition, our imitation of the history, and our appreciation of God's supply. Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus. It is then good and right that we should give gifts.

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