



Unto Us

Is Christmas Overrated?

How would you respond to someone who says, “Christmas is overrated!”? Today I encountered a young man in the parking lot of a busy store. The young man was retrieving shopping carts scattered all over the lot, and I was simply pushing my cart to meet him. He thanked me and I said, “Merry Christmas!” He, at first, chuckled and then his words turned rather sharp, “Christmas is overrated, you know. Nothing but a lot of extra work out in the cold, more rude people than at any time of the year, and what’s in it for me? Nothing much! Just a lot of grief, I tell you.” I had already taken a few steps back toward the car when the young man started his assault on my “Merry Christmas” greeting.

So...how would you respond to this young man if you were in my place? Your answer would be sharing the Good News of Christmas and the blessings that God intended when He came from heaven to earth to save all mankind – including you, me and this misguided young man. My heart sinks when I hear anything that depicts Christmas as commercial, a hassle or especially as being overrated. I’m sure you feel the same way. **Please read this entire article** to see how I responded to this young man, but more importantly, to see what God has given us with Christmas.

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In response to young man’s sharp words, I walked up to him and gently said, “I have to tell you, your comment about Christmas makes my heart sink to my feet. I understand you have a difficult and sometimes thankless job. But let me tell you with certainty, Christmas is far from overrated. It’s God’s gift to you in the birth of a Savior, the Prince of Peace. In love He came the first Christmas and in His love He continues to come to you with His grace and care.” He quickly repented of his harsh assessment of Christmas saying, **“I’ve said that all day long and everyone else agreed with me.”** (Is this truly what the world around us thinks about Christmas? How tragic!) To which I responded, “A very Merry Christmas. God gives Himself for you.” You may have thought of far better responses than that, but that’s what weighed on my heart to share with this young man I’ve seen on several occasions before without such an encounter. I pray that God would give me many future encounters to share the Good News.

Overrated to me means “Not living up to the billing and all the hype; not being what it seems.” For the young man I encountered on a bitterly cold and dismal day, Christmas wasn’t living up to its billing but rather consisted of a busy, hectic season and encountering people who all agreed that Christmas was way too much of a hassle to enjoy. Surmising his circumstances and lot in life, he simply perceived that there was nothing much in it for him.

The circumstances that surround us all this Christmas season are heavy burdens indeed: hospitals overflowing with COVID patients with still more variants two years after the first outbreak and a year after having the vaccine available; mourning the deaths of children in a school shooting and the fear of safety in the eyes of our children and grandchildren; over 100 dead from a series of tornados that ravaged the south, especially in Kentucky; battles over masks, abortion rights, civil rights and justice; and inflation making everything more expensive.

All these circumstances plus the ones that weigh heavy on your heart personally are indeed unwelcome visitors at any time, much less the Advent and Christmas season. **At this point, just a day before Christmas, have you ever felt the same way?** You gaze over your life, the burden and stress you

are facing, and you surmise, “What’s in it for me?” “How do I bear all that is on my plate?” “Does Christmas affect any of it at all?” “Is Christmas more than a holiday that ends when the wrapping paper is thrown away?” “Is Christmas overrated?”

God has an emphatic answer: NO!

God’s answer shifts our attention away from our circumstances, away from our burdens, away from our jobs, chores and responsibilities and directs our attention to be solely upon Him. His answer involves a heaven-sent Gift that seemed too impossible to believe – and yet, it was God’s answer that made it all possible and makes it so very important to believe. Sometimes when faced with the uncertain we say, “I know but... I know God is with me always, but...I wasn’t expecting this news, I didn’t know this or that would happen, who would have dreamed this?! I know the stat answer of, ‘God is with me,’ but...what does it all mean for me?”

I hear those sentiments all the time and I know you do as well. What is our answer? I am reminded of 1 Peter 3:15, *“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”* The Bible, God’s own Word which is accompanied by the continual work of the Holy Spirit, equips us with a defense before the world that is constantly asking – either verbally or non-verbally: **Is Christmas overrated? What’s in it for me?**

Our answer can be as simple as the names of Christ given in Scripture: Jesus (He saves), Immanuel (God with us), Wonderful Counselor (He knows your heart), Mighty God (no circumstance and no things are beyond His power), Everlasting Father (He’s personal), Prince of Peace (who doesn’t need peace, right?). Our answer places the person’s life in the hands of God who loves them. Martin Luther said that the only miracle greater than the virgin birth was the miracle that Mary believed. The Holy Spirit worked that miracle and can work the same miracle in the lives of the world around us. I love the words of the Apostle Paul at Christmas time: *“Thanks be to God for His inexpressible Gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15)*. Inexpressible is a blessing or feeling too great to be described or conveyed with words.

Christmas – what’s in it for me? The promise of the true God who keeps every promise is this: “I am with you through it all (whatever your all is)! He is the God who sent His Son in the flesh, who sends His Living Word to you daily, who gives you His Body and Blood for the forgiveness of all sin, who heads the Church to help carry the world’s burdens and place them on Christ, and who lifts us up as we call upon His name in prayer. The Gift of Jesus is impossible for our hearts and minds to express, but thanks be to God for by His Spirit, it’s not impossible to believe and trust! Most people facing adverse circumstances are overcome with fear. The very nature of fear is to be concerned about what will happen next or what is going to happen to our loved ones. God answers this fear with another promise, “Fear not. I am with you always. Nothing is impossible with Me. Your future is in My hands.” An inexpressible Gift indeed. That’s Christmas!

Is Christmas overrated? Only if you miss the truth that it is God in it for us! Jesus came as a Baby at Bethlehem to be just as we are, yet without sin. One day those little legs of His carried Jesus up to Jerusalem where He willingly submitted Himself to the torture of Golgatha. His back felt the stripes whereby we are healed. His head was capped with a crown of thorns as man mocked his Maker. Those feet and hands of His were punctured by crude nails as He offered up His life for the life of the world and as a sufficient ransom for all. That mouth of His spoke the word of forgiveness for all sin and full atonement. His eyes beheld His mother and His lips spoke of love and comfort to her and to each of us. Jesus’ heart was pierced, stilled and silent for three days in the tomb. But on Easter morn, Jesus extended those nail-scarred hands and breathed His forgiving Spirit of peace. He ascended into heaven and now rules with His presence for all people at all times. Inexpressible but a truth that can

and must be shared around the table, the Christmas tree or even in a parking lot on a cold, bitter and dreary day.

Christmas is the giving of a Gift that says: God is all in for YOU!

Long ago, there ruled in Persia a wise and good king. He loved his people. He wanted to know how they lived. He wanted to know about their hardships. Often he dressed in the clothes of a working man or a beggar, and went to the homes of the poor. No one whom he visited thought that he was their ruler. One time he visited a very poor peasant who lived in a cellar. He ate the coarse food the poor man ate. He spoke cheerful, kind words to him. Then he left. Later he visited the poor man again and disclosed his identity by saying, "I am your king!" The king thought the man would surely ask for some gift or favor, but he didn't. Instead he said, "You left your palace and your glory to visit me in this dark, dreary place. You ate the food I ate. You brought gladness to my heart! To others you have given your rich gifts. **To me you have given a richer gift - yourself!**"

In John's Gospel (John 1:1-18), we are introduced to a God who is willing to make any accommodation to have fellowship with us. Even becoming human. John's Gospel announced that the Word made flesh - Logos - fully participated in the realm of creation by becoming one of His creatures. The eternal Logos who was with God, who is God, and who created the world, became flesh. We call this cardinal doctrine the incarnation. A Latin word, incarnation literally means, "God incorporated in flesh." The Creator became a part of His creation by taking on human flesh. It is one of the essential yet incomprehensible doctrines of our faith. It is the belief that God the Son became a human being without relinquishing His deity. It is the belief that Jesus Christ was both 100% God and 100% human at the same time. Such teaching transcends human understanding.

God became the least among us, a tiny, poor, helpless infant. We did nothing to bring Christ from heaven. He came without our invitation, without preparation, without our decision, without our welcome. He was sent by the Father, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of Mary. And all this He did without consulting us, without our help. This is entirely God's doing, that the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. God has brought honor to our dishonored humanity. Luther once said that the angels of heaven are not so blessed as we are, even though they are greater and stronger than we are. For the Son of God did not come as an angel, but as a man. This is the ultimate honor that God bestowed to us, to take up our human nature and become one of us. God dignifies our flesh and blood by wearing it as His own. He didn't simply take possession of a man, as the devil sometimes does. He became man, fully human. God's Word, which was given to Moses on stone, has now been made flesh.

Do you remember the movie "Oh, God!" starring George Burns and John Denver? While the movie was theologically distorted and even disturbing, there is one scene in the movie where Burns, who plays God, appears to this supermarket assistant manager (John Denver) wearing tennis shoes, glasses, and a fishing hat. When asked why he looks the way he does, Burns answers, "**I picked a look you could understand.**" And that is what happened in the incarnation. God picked a look we could understand. He became one of us. His hands were calloused from years of handling lumber. His skin tanned from the Middle Eastern sun. He grew tired, hungry, and thirsty. He was tempted, yet He did not sin. God picked a look we could understand. He became one of us. So many religions seek to know how we, as humans, can get in touch with God. And yet the Word testifies **that God came to us.**

Only God brings Christmas home to you and to the world around you!

God brings Christmas home – an inexpressible Gift. He knocks on the door of your heart and boldly proclaims in flesh and blood - Here is what I have done for you as Immanuel - God with you. It is as

practical a doctrine, as practical a comfort as can be found anywhere or shared with others at any time: The Son of God was made the Son of man, that we might be made the children of God. God knows our situation perfectly. We have a High Priest who is able to sympathize with our weakness. He knows what it is to suffer sorrow and pain and death.

Christ taking on flesh is the greatest comfort for us. It's pure grace! You are gifted from God Himself. Jesus' sinless conception in the womb of Mary is reckoned yours! His birth is yours! His sinless life is yours! His suffering and death are yours! Do your sins weigh against you? God says emphatically, "Not anymore. My grace is sufficient for you." You are gifted with forgiveness, peace with God. That's how God works. God uses concrete, stuff we can touch, taste, understand - means to bring this incarnation to us. He uses water and the Word; He uses the voice of the pastor; He uses bread and wine. And in these concrete things, His will is made known. *"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people" (Titus 2:11).*

In the incarnation, God's glory is brought home to us. God glories to save you and dwell with you forever. He desires for you to personally know of this glory - no matter what burdens you bear. God comes to you in person with a Word of courage, Good News, joy and hope. That's why God took on flesh - to be your personal Savior, a personal Word of comfort. But He also did this for people you know - for they are part of your everyday life. Want to share the perfect gift for everyone around you? Speak freely and boldly of the Christ who comes to us personally.

If Christmas is anything – it's underrated. Our hearts overflow with the inexpressible!

The Gift of Christ is more than we can ask or imagine. In the Incarnation and His coming to us, we observe what Christmas is all about. A group of first graders decided to produce their very own Christmas program. All the major characters were there - Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, the wise men from afar...but no Mary. Shortly after the production began, there was heard from behind some bales of straw some moaning and groaning - Mary was in labor. A doctor with a white coat and black bag was then ushered onto the stage and disappeared with Joseph behind the bales of straw. When the first cry was heard, the characters all asked in unison, "What is it - a boy or a girl?" The doctor emerged from behind the bales holding the Baby in his arms announcing to the audience, "It's a God!"

John reveals to us that on that first Christmas, some didn't understand God taking on flesh, some refused to know Jesus, and some rejected Him completely. Not much has changed on this Christmas over 2,000 years later. People grumble in parking lots and mourn the hassle of the season that has been hyped by commercials, media, and even Hallmark. In Hallmark movies, everything turns out just great (and figured out already in the first five minutes). They aren't real life. We live in a broken world. A broken world where children kill children; where disasters impact the lives of those we know and love; and challenges are a part of our daily lives. But it's to this broken world, Christ came, comes daily, and will come again soon. And His presence alone is an inexpressible and glorious Gift. And it's a Gift meant to be given to all people.

Christmas – what's in it for anyone? God Himself!! God came for us in the person of Jesus Christ. When Mary realized the surprising miracle that that God worked in her, she broke out in song. She couldn't hold back her praise. I love how *The Message* paraphrases Luke 1:37-38: *"(The angel said) Nothing, you see, is impossible with God." And Mary said, "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be to me as you say."* In the same way, God has chosen you – not because of some special qualities or abilities you possess (because those too come from God alone) but because God is so gracious. The Lord is with us – we need not fear anything. We are God's instruments for Christ lives in us. And Christ is the Son of God so nothing is impossible for Him. So place all your so-called impossible thoughts and prayers before the throne of the Savior who loves you. You too are favored and blessed through His grace. May it be to each of us according to His Word.

Join me in praying for the Holy Spirit to work through all our greetings, encounters, and celebrations this Christmas. With the Spirit's mighty work, it makes all the difference in the world the words you share and the Gospel you proclaim. For to those who believe in Christ as their Savior, they are given power to become the children of God, they are spiritually reborn, and they receive the fulness of His grace. That's what Christmas is all about: our King could give us all the worldly riches of His Kingdom that are temporary, but He has given us Himself. That's the gift that is ours for eternity. John writes near the end of his Gospel: *"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name"* (John 20:31). May the blessings of the Incarnate Word - born to you, to me, to the world - fill our Christmas celebration with renewed joy and understanding of the everlasting love of the God who came to us and continues to do so.

How do you respond to the world around you that thinks, for any reason at all, that Christmas is overrated? I pray that the Holy Spirit will overflow from you sharing that the Gift of Christmas is Christ Himself – an expressible Gift, now and for eternity. We, the English District Evangelization Team, encourage you to share your thoughts about this article or your prayer requests so we can lift them up for you. Contact us at evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org. May all of you and those whom you hold dear have a blessed, safe, and very Merry Christmas celebration with joys and peace too marvelous for words. For God is with you always. From God to you - Merry Christmas and a happy and blessed New Year in His name.

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20