

'Tis the Season

A four-week Advent devotional

The Church at South Mountain



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How Can I Be a Witness During the Christmas Season?



Keith Brazier
Men's Ministry

The Christmas season is already upon us. Holiday cards line the shelves. Trees and decorations are on display in many stores. Ads for deals bombard us by mail, the media, and online. Recipes and coupons remind us to grab our favorite foods before they are all gone. Plans are being finalized, discussed, and hashed out as scores of people weigh their options with regards to whom they will visit, invite over, or tolerate for gathering time and festivities. More than any other time of the year, spending becomes a hot topic as individuals and families rationalize, justify, and/or debate whether or not to spend and how much. Clearly, the world system has developed a well-rounded marketing plan to remind the masses just how important this season is. In the midst of all this activity that will lead a number astray into a frenzy of overindulgence and self-gratification, others will be more profoundly reminded, brought face to face with, or quickly catapulted into feelings of desolation, inadequacy, loneliness, grief, and despair. In response to all of this, kingdom minded individuals can clearly demonstrate to the world just how important Christ is to this season.

Believers understand the seriousness of being lost in a lost world. We are familiar with the trappings of the systems around us as well as the struggles that originate within our own flesh. This life experience comes alongside of the firsthand experiential knowledge of Christ's work on the cross and resurrection as it relates to Christ's work for us and in us. There is no way for us to comprehensively break down and expound on every doctrine and theological question to the complete satisfaction of those who are lost and perishing (*John 5:40; Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14*). Our duty is to be a living testimony to the endless mercy and grace that has been bestowed upon us by the living Savior.

Best of all, we do not have to rely on ourselves to do it. Christ has given us power through the Holy Spirit (*Acts 1:8*). God—in His sovereignty—prepares us and places us exactly where He wants us to be in order to carry out His plan for reaching the elect (*Psalms 119:71; Genesis 50:20*). As ambassadors of the good news, salt of the earth, and light in the midst of darkness, our lives witness to the truth of Christ as the only means of salvation in a desperately dark and wicked world. Being a witness not only denotes a state of being, it is also a call for action or a state of doing.

WEEK ONE



This holiday season will provide plenty of opportunities to be a witness while you are out and about, at home, or in the workplace. Friends, family, co-workers, acquaintances, and strangers (considered our neighbors too) tend to gather more frequently and spend greater periods of time with one another during these times. Along with their shopping lists, appetites, and stories, they bring their attitudes, misconceptions, beliefs, hang-ups, disappointments, and struggles. We can be a witness to all of them first by dealing honestly and rightly with our own sin. This will allow us to meet others where they are in a more appropriate manner without presenting ourselves as judgmental or legalistic. Although some regularly may be outright hostile to the message of the cross, they are more inclined to listen or engage in conversation with the messenger if they can readily see a genuine heart of conviction which is authentically concerned about their well-being. As the saying goes, *"Real recognizes real."* People want to be able to connect with someone who understands their struggle without playing games. Overused clichés, stale prayers, and canned responses only incite people to strengthen their guard, and move towards violence (outbursts, sarcasm, verbal assaults, etc.) or silence as a means to save face or defend themselves. Know that people are watching how you speak and—even more closely—what you do. From that moment forward, they are creating personal stories and formulating opinions about you. For those who are dealing with physical pain and/or mental anguish, be consciously empathetic with regards to their need, and share the truth about Jesus Christ. If your assistance is requested, offer to seek out or share appropriate resources. The reality is that you do not have all of the answers; only He does. His way is perfect. Your assignment is to introduce them to Him through your actions and speech.

Reflection

1. During this Christmas season, is there someone in particular—or a type of person—that you find difficult to be around that you are sure to encounter? How can you be intentional about being a witness to that person?
2. Do you know someone who is hurting (depressed, alone, etc.) or struggling with a vice or some other sin which is hindering their life and affecting others? Pray that the opportunity presents itself to pour into this person. What are some points that you would like to get across? If met with resistance, what might you say?



How Do I Renew My Own Sense of Awe and Adoration About Christ?



Craig Cummings
Pastoral Assistant

It's the most wonderful time of year...there'll be parties for hosting, marshmallows for toasting, and caroling out in the snow. There'll be scary ghost stories and tales of the glories of the Christmases long, long ago. It's the most wonderful time of year.

Those are some of the lyrics from one of the most iconic songs played during the holiday season and I would venture to say, for most Americans it describes the wonder of the season for them. As Christians, we know that Christ is the true reason for the season, yet how do we guard against letting the world's portrayal of Christmas sap our wonder, awe, and adoration of the true reason for the season, Jesus Christ?

I want to suggest **three truths to ponder** that might help you renew your wonder, awe, and adoration for Christ this Christmas season.

Truth #1: His Sacrificial Gift

My favorite verse of the bible is 2 Corinthians 5:21: *"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."* The reason that is my favorite verse of the bible is every time I contemplate it, I am just awe-struck by the fact that the God of the universe would condescend Himself to such a humbling state for an undeserving sinner like me. Just think about it! The first person of the Holy Trinity (God the Father) would ask of the second person of the Holy Trinity (Jesus) to take unto Himself our sin (i.e. to experience the wrath of God that we deserved); and in exchange we get His righteousness. In bartering terms, that is the score of ALL TIME!

So, when you start to stress over who's getting what or who is giving what, just remember that Christ has given the greatest gift ever! No stocking stuffer, not the latest gadget, not anything can ever compare to what God has freely given us in His Son, Jesus Christ.



Truth #2: His Faithfulness

When we consider what God has done by fulfilling the prophecy He spoke hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus through His prophet Isaiah—that a child would be born of a virgin and that His name would be Immanuel (God with us)—we need to understand that is just part of the story. Yes, God came down to us at Christmas, but He came down to lift us up!

God's faithfulness is why Simeon and the prophetess Anna rejoiced when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple as a baby, as it was a fulfillment of God's promise to Simeon that he would not die before he witnessed the redeemer of his people. Jesus was God's Son, yet He and His earthly family carried out all the ceremonies according to God's law. Jesus was not born above the law; instead, He fulfilled it perfectly. But consider how He did it. The second person of the Holy Trinity stepped out of Glory, clothed himself in human flesh (as an infant), despised the shame of those whom He created, and ultimately took God's wrath upon Himself on the cross. What a savior!

Remember His faithfulness to you this Christmas season rather than all the eye-candy the world would have you believe is more important.

Truth #3: His Eternality

Jesus did not come into existence at His birth. He always was and is the great I AM. John says that, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God...And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14)*. And why did He come? So that, *"as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12)*. C.S. Lewis puts it this way in his book, *Mere Christianity*, "The Son of God became man to enable men to become the sons of God."

Christian, this holiday season when family may be far off, and you won't be home for the holidays, don't fret. You are now part of a much bigger family: God's family! And He chose you before the foundation of the earth (*Ephesians 1:4*)!

WEEK TWO



It's a marvelous thing to contemplate these truths. In a lot of ways, they are mysteries that we cannot fully wrap our heads around. Yet, we take them by faith. And as we do, our wonder, awe, and adoration for Christ grows more and more. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great theologian, pastor, and martyr once wrote, "What a mistake to think that it is the task of theology to unravel God's mystery, to bring it down to the flat, ordinary human wisdom of experience and reason! It is the task of theology solely to preserve God's wonder as wonder, to understand, to defend, to glorify God's mystery as mystery."

So, as we enter this Advent season and prepare to celebrate our Lord and Savior's birth, let us not lose sight of the wonder and awe surrounding this mysterious exchange He has transacted for us in His coming. He who knew no sin, became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (*2 Corinthians 5:21*).



Does Gift-Giving Undermine the Reason for the Season?



Pastor Andy Lack
Pastor of Mission

Let's face it, for a large percentage of our culture Christmas is all about gift-giving. 'Tis the season for checking Amazon wish lists, scouting holiday deals, and stampeding mobs through Walmart on Black Friday. Everything from car dealerships to pet stores seek to capitalize on the "giving season". Jesus goes unmentioned (unless you're lucky enough to catch the classic, "A Charlie Brown Christmas"), and the holiday is wrenched from its Christian context. The commercialization of this once sacred holiday is at times both saddening and maddening for the Christian, and we are left wondering whether or not we should participate in this cultural tradition of gift-giving. Does gift-giving undermine the reason for the season?

To answer this question, we have to first ask ourselves, "What is the reason for the season?" And of course, the answer to that question is both wonderfully simple and infinitely complex. Christmas is a celebration of God's amazing grace and love, in that He took the initiative to reconcile man and God by *giving* His own Son to die in the place of rebel sinners like you and I (*Romans 5:8*). It is a celebration of God come in the flesh in the person of His beloved Son—born that man no more may die (*John 1:14*). It is a celebration of God with us, Immanuel (*Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23*). It is a celebration of the Savior come into the world, *giving* His own life so that all who believe in Him might be *given* the free *gift* of eternal life (*John 3:16*). So, you see, Christmas is all about gift-giving after all. It's all about God's gift to us.

So, given that the reason for the season is to celebrate God's gift of Jesus Christ to us, are we undermining that message when we give gifts to other people? The answer is, **it depends on where our focus is.**

It's very easy for us to give an acknowledgment that Christ is our focus during the Christmas season, but often our actions speaks louder than our words. Be honest; the amount of time, energy, and passion we display towards buying and receiving gifts often exceeds the time, energy, and passion we display towards Christ and serving Him and others. In fact, it is not uncommon for the very act of buying and receiving gifts to lead to sinful thoughts and behaviors such as impatience, greed, selfishness, covetousness, and idolatry. In this sense, gift-giving certainly can undermine the reason for the season.

WEEK THREE



How then do we guard ourselves from this loss of focus?

1. **Commit to seek Jesus every day.** Commit to seek Him in His Word and in prayer every day—despite the busyness and hectic schedules—so that you might know Him and delight in Him as your Savior and Lord.
2. **Refuse to allow the gifts you give or receive to dominate your anticipation of Christmas.** Gifts can be nice tokens of love or appreciation to family and friends, but they should not be what we most anticipate about that day. Rather, we should be eager to praise God for His immeasurable gift.
3. **Take time to teach your children what we celebrate at Christmas.** Teaching serves not only to help our young ones to understand, but to remind us parents of what we can so easily forget.
4. **Consider your gifts more thoughtfully.** There are always stocking stuffers, toys, and gadgets that can and will be replaced by new ones next year; but instead of—or in addition to—these things, consider giving more meaningful and life-changing gifts. For example, you could donate in your friend's name to a God-honoring charity or reserve a space for your family to serve together at a local soup-kitchen.
5. **Take the opportunity to proclaim God's gift.** During the Christmas season, gifts are on people's minds. What a great opportunity to tell them about the greatest gift of all: the gift of God's own Son.

The magi understood that Christmas was about God's gift to men and women and children around the world, and they responded by bringing gifts of their own to Jesus.

- What can you and/or your family do this Christmas season to give a gift of love and adoration to Jesus?
- What do you need to do to make sure your focus is on Christ this Christmas season?



Does the Incarnation Really Matter?



Pastor Marvin R. Knight
Senior Pastor

Try to imagine a world with no Gospel story. Keep, if you like, jolly ol' Santa Claus and his reindeer. Keep, if you will, the bright lights, the beautiful trees, the tasty smells, and the shopping deals. But no Jesus. Would the old, old story of the birth of Jesus really matter to our fast-pace, gigabyte, Facebook, Twitter following world?

- To millions who have *never* heard of the Gospel...YES, the incarnation matters!
- To millions who have indeed *heard* of the joyful sound, but have never trusted Him...YES, the incarnation matters!
- To millions whose lives have been transformed by faith, whose records in heaven have been expunged, whose sin have been covered, whose positions have been changed from enemy combatant to joint heir with God and co-heir with Christ...without a doubt, YES, the incarnation matters!

But why? Why does the incarnation matter to sinners and saints, lost and saved, unbelievers and believers alike? The Apostle John put it this way,

"And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true: and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life."—1 John 5:20

The incarnation matters because in the "infleshment" of the Son of God, He has given to believers an understanding of something that personally impacts every creature. What has the incarnation "*given us understanding*" of?

WEEK FOUR



Of God's HEART

"No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him."—John 1:18

Christ has explained...

- That God is more than force and intelligence.
- That God is a personal being. So personal that He knows your name and feels your pain.
- That God is a Father with a heart.
- That God is a God of self-denying, self-sacrificing love.

Of God's GIFT

To the Samaritan woman who was astonished that a Jew would ask for a drink from a Samaritan woman, He said,

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."—John 4:10

This woman was ignorant of three important facts: 1) she was ignorant of WHO He was, 2) she was ignorant of WHAT He had to offer, and 3) she was ignorant of HOW she could receive it. When you stop to think about it, that's the Gospel. Who is this Jesus? What does He have to offer? How do you receive Him? That's the essence of the good news. This is why the incarnation matters.

WEEK FOUR



Of God's LOVE

"By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."—1 John 4:9-10

God is love and so He must communicate, not just in words, but in deeds. Here we see the greatest expression of His love in the sending of His Son. As Paul wrote in Romans 5:8, *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

A.E. Brooke once said, "The true nature of God's love has now been shown, in a way which men can understand and appreciate, in the fact and the purpose of the incarnation. God gave His best, that men might be enabled to live the life of God."

Of the world's VANITY

Jesus said, *"The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil." (John 7:7)*

"For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lust; but the one who does the will of God lives forever."—1 John 2:16-17

Someone has say that "Vanity is what you get at the end of a popped soap bubble...nothing." Jesus said, *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b)*

Because of the incarnation, we can know:

- God's heart
- God's gift
- God's love
- The world's vanity

WEEK FOUR



Reflection

- Have you come to know—in a warm, saving, personal way—the Lord Jesus Christ?
- Has God’s gift become yours by taking and trusting Jesus?
- Have the things of this world grown strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace?

The incarnation matters.