

“Have a Theological Christmas”
Galatians 4:1-7
December 21, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

God’s House Kindergarten had their Christmas Program this past week, and, as usual, the children provided us with some amusing moments. In addition to the normal gum-chewing and nose-picking incidents that you get every year, there are always a few unique moments the children provide. In one of the songs, three children came forward to ring bells while the rest of the children sang a song about Christmas bells. One of the bell ringers was standing behind the privacy rail in front of the choir. Perhaps to show everyone that she was not at all scared by the demands of her performance in front of so many people, she placed her right elbow on the privacy rail, put her bored-looking face in her hand and lazily rang the bell with her free hand. Some people celebrate Christmas with about that same amount of enthusiasm. Perhaps they have become bored with the whole celebration, and find themselves simply going through the motions of the holidays.

Others are more like another little girl in the Christmas program. She was a bit overwhelmed by the entire ordeal and just couldn’t face it. So she didn’t. For the entire program she turned her back to the audience. A couple of times she would try to turn and face the right direction, but would always do so with both hands covering her eyes. Like her, many are overwhelmed by Christmas.

My favorite, though, was a little boy sitting on the front row who undoubtedly attends a church where the worship style is a little more expressive than what is generally the case here. In imitation of what I would imagine he saw in his own church, he looked heavenward with closed eyes and lifted both hands to the sky. The problem was that he didn’t seem to know all the words to the songs and wasn’t fully able to join in. He was trying to capture a certain feeling, but without any content. Many approach Christmas similarly, trying to capture a certain holiday cheer, but without the benefit of any solid content.

Whether you find Christmas boring, overwhelming or empty, there is good news in the passage before us today. Paul gives us some theological content behind Christmas that will make it the merry Christmas we so often wish upon others. I would like us to focus on this passage by considering four contrasts between the way Christmas is often celebrated in our culture and the biblical portrayal of it.

I. Receiving Instead of Taking

It is often said that Christmas is about giving rather than receiving. In order to understand Christmas, though, I believe we need to see the contrast as one not between giving and receiving, but between receiving and taking. The place to start is with receiving. I like what Eugene Peterson says about this in his book *Traveling Light*.

Receive is a freedom word. *Take* is not. To receive is to accept what the divine largess provides for us. To take is to plunder whatever is not nailed down. To receive is to do what children do in the family. To take is to do what pirates do on the high seas.

All studies of the loss of freedom are stories of *taking*: Adam and Eve taking the fruit from the tree, Prometheus taking fire from the gods, Siegfried taking the gold from the Nibelung. All the stories of access to freedom are stories of *receiving*.” p. 109

We can't make it to first base in either Christianity or Christmas until we know what it is to receive from God. This passage teaches us that we must receive from God no matter *when* he gives and no matter *what* he gives. We receive from God in his timing. Notice that Paul says that God sent his Son “**when the fullness of time had come**” (v. 4). There were things that had to happen before this gift could be sent. The main one in view in this passage is the giving of the Law of Moses. The Law had to show to mankind his need of deliverance by showing him his utter inability at self-deliverance. Keeping the Law of God is like aging—it's not as easy as it looks. But you don't discover that until you try it. You can't know your complete inability until you earnestly try to keep the law, and the entire Old Testament is the tale of Israel's miserable failure at doing just that. It is often the case that God must prepare us to receive his good gifts, and we are usually not ready for them until we come to the end of ourselves.

Not only must we receive God's gifts when he chooses to give them, but also we must receive the gift he chooses to give. In this text, we read that God sent his Son to redeem us. That's the gift he sends because that's the gift we need. One of the main issues of the Protestant Reformation concerned the degree to which we need God's help. There were some who said that mankind is like a toddler learning to walk. God is the parent who is right there to support us when we stumble, until we can learn to walk on our own. Martin Luther disagreed and said that we are more like a caterpillar in a ring of fire, with the only possible deliverance coming from above. God sent his Son because nothing less would do, and in order to receive that gift we must acknowledge the depth of our need. The reason people don't choose to receive the gift of God's Son is that they are too proud to do so, thinking that the need is for a little help rather than complete deliverance.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a great example to us of what it means to receive the incarnation. She shows great courage in receiving the word of the angel that she would be the mother of the Lord. After considering the difficulty of a virgin being with child, both its biological impossibility and the social challenges

facing her as a result, she uttered the classic statement of what it means to receive God's gifts into our lives. **"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word"** (Luke 1:38). In his book of Christmas meditations, Doug Webster says that Mary made room for God in her life.

We confess that making room for God is not how we look at life. Typically, we wonder if there is any place in this world for us. "Where do I fit in?" is the normal response, especially among young people. "How can I find my place in this vast, competitive, confusing world?" The circumstances of life seem to conspire against us. Most of the time we feel unrecognized, unnoticed and anonymous. It's like we don't belong here, and when we are noticed, it seems like we are put down or embarrassed. Mary's life reminds us that the real issue in life, for her as well as for us, is not finding our place in this world, but of making room in our lives for God (*A Christmas Journey*, p. 95).

II. Love Instead of Sentimentality

I believe that the biggest reason people don't have a merry Christmas is sentimentalism. Sentimentality is when we seek a good feeling apart from any foundation in truth. The central truth of Christianity that surrounds Christmas is the one stated here: God sent his Son to redeem us. I can think of no better summary of the central meaning of Christmas. Yet many attempt to cultivate holiday cheer apart from that central truth. Our culture has created certain symbols of this holiday cheer. There is the Christmas tree with all its decorations, Santa Claus, mistletoe, the stockings hung from the mantle of the fireplace, the family gathered around the fire drinking eggnog, and the numerous other traditions we have created surrounding Christmas. There's nothing wrong with any of these in themselves. But we must remember that these things are like eating sweets. It's okay to enjoy a Whitman Sampler box from time to time, but if you ate one box and nothing else at every meal, your health would quickly suffer.

Let me say this in another way. There is a big difference between celebrating the mood of Christmas and the meaning of Christmas. The mood quickly goes stale when severed from the meaning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and later executed by the Nazis for his opposition to their gross injustices. He draws a very helpful analogy between his imprisonment and the incarnation. "A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened *from the outside*, is not a bad picture of Advent." The only path to a truly merry Christmas comes from believing this central truth.

III. Freedom Instead of Bondage

Paul says that Jesus has been sent **"to redeem those who were under the law."** He has come to deliver us out of a bondage that is related to being under

the law. What is this bondage? It is the endless expectations the law places upon us, expectations that we cannot meet. We don't meet them not because there is anything wrong with the expectations of the law, but because there is something wrong with us. We feel the obligation, but are unable to meet it, resulting in enslavement. This enslavement is not unlike the many burden of expectations brought by Christmas itself. There are parties which you are expected to attend, not all of which you really want to attend. But you do so anyway, because you feel obligated. There are gifts you buy, not because you want to, but because you are expected to. It's even worse if you really don't know what to buy, and you do it only out of a sense of obligation. There are Christmas programs you are expected to attend, family members you are obliged to visit, Christmas cards that have to be sent out, decorations that need to be put up and a seemingly endless list of Christmas chores. You're in Christmas prison, and it's not unlike the tyranny brought by the law.

Jesus redeems us from the law by being born under the law and all its obligations. But unlike us, he has successfully met all its obligations, by which we are redeemed. Only a free man can redeem a slave, and Jesus is a free man. He has bought our freedom with his blood, so that now we have been released from the unending obligations of the law. It should feel to us like a snow day at school. Do you remember what that feels like? We get so few of those in Alabama, but the feeling is so exhilarating that it's not hard to remember. A snow day releases us from all the things we thought we were going to have to do that day, and we are free to do whatever we want. Such is the freedom Jesus has won for us. Paul is quick to teach us that this freedom should not be used to indulge the sinful flesh (5:13), for that would only bring us into a new bondage. The freedom from the law is intended to bring us into a new and joyful service to our heavenly Father.

In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther says that we can boldly say this to the law: "O law, thou hast no power over me, therefore dost thou accuse and condemn me in vain. for I believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God, whom the Father sent into the world to redeem us miserable sinners oppressed with the tyranny of the law. He gave His life, He shed His blood for me. Therefore, feeling thy terrors and threatenings, O law, I plunge my conscience in the wounds, blood, death, resurrection and victory of my Savior, Christ." (pp. 232-33)

IV. Perfect Family Instead of Imperfect

The longing for family and home is a strong one, especially at Christmas. Like many of you, I've driven through more than one winter storm to get home for Christmas. If the truth be told, though, there are many people who, after making the effort, wonder why they were so intent to come home. Until returning for a visit, they had forgotten how their family seemed to get into these conflicts and misunderstandings that ended up hurting one another's feelings. In spite of the

problems, though, the longings don't go away. I believe it's because they touch a deeper longing that Paul points us to here. It is the longing to be part of a perfect family.

There is such a family, and it's the one portrayed in our passage. It is the divine family, consisting of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. All three appear in our passage. The Father sends the Son, who redeems men and women. The Spirit appears twice in this passage, first in the phrase "born of a woman," since Mary became pregnant as "the Holy Spirit came upon her" (Luke 1:35). He appears a second time as the one by whom we are empowered to call out to God as our Father. It is this divine family that Paul says we become a part of through faith in Christ. Jesus was sent, **"to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"**

Our families are a wonderful gift of God to us, but they are not without pain. The word *nostalgia* is Greek in origin, coming from two words that mean "homecoming pain." Several years ago, I landed at the Baltimore/Washington airport near where we used to live before moving to Birmingham. I rented a car and drove to our old neighborhood. On the way, I passed the baseball fields where I used to coach Matthew's Little League team when he was just a little guy. There were good memories there, but as I drove, it was painful to think about the fact that those times and events would never be around again. I believe that it is something similar that happens at Christmas. We attempt to recapture something about our past that's hard for us even to describe. If our Christmas celebrations are to be joyful, we must change our perspective from the past to the future. Christmas is not so much about recapturing something from our past as it is about appreciating something of our future. Our home is not in our past but in our future. And our future is as a part of the family of God, literally.

CONCLUSION:

Martin Luther once said that the Christmas story consisted of three miracles: "The first, that God became man; the second, that a virgin was a mother; and the third, that the human heart should believe this." May God make your Christmas a very joyful one as you believe these things!