

No Shortcuts to Christmas

When our children were growing up, there was a priceless event that took place one Christmas – to this day it brings laughter whenever my wife and I mention it. My wife had given clear instructions to the kids about one month before Christmas that no one was to open anything delivered by the mail or parcel services that come to our house. As Jonathan's parents, we were notified that he was about to be inducted into Who's Who Among American High School Students. And as is the American way, we were hit with some marketing. We were told for a certain price we could get a fancy mug reflecting Jonathan's newly acquired status. Mom kept looking for deliveries, but none came. One day as she was in Jonathan's room, she noticed the mug displayed on top of his chest of drawers. Without correcting or addressing the subject, she took his mug, wrapped it up and placed it (unbeknownst to Jonathan) under the Christmas tree for original intent – Christmas. Jonathan did not say anything about it; he knew he was not supposed to open anything that came to the house. Perhaps he thought, "Wow! I got away with it."

As was our custom on Christmas Eve, the kids were allowed to pick out one present from under the tree and open it, keeping the rest for Christmas morning. Jonathan, of all our kids, was the most impetuous and impatient. He kept bugging us, "Come on, let's pick out a present; let's open one," as he coaxed us and cajoled his siblings to join him in the badgering. Finally, the kids gathered around the tree, each one picking a present. Jonathan, to assure himself he was really picking a winner, kept pondering over which one to choose. I must add, he was also the "sneaky" one of the bunch, who would search our room, look in closets and when under the tree would shake his presents when he thought no one was looking and it was not unusual to see one portion of his presents slightly disheveled due to lifting up the edges in an attempted inspection.

With beaming eyes and big smile Jonathan unwrapped his one and only Christmas Eve present only to find to his mortification, his fancy mug. He held it high above his head and wailed his cry that I often called his "Lucy" cry (because it sounded strangely like Lucille Ball when she was in distress.) In whining frustration he said, "Wait a minute! This is not fair; I already knew about this gift. Let me open another one!" We said, "Jonathan, you would not have known about this gift had you obeyed and not opened the mail, as you were told." As much as he begged and pleaded, we didn't give an inch. He had to wait until Christmas morning to get the surprises. Jonathan learned a hard lesson that day - there is no shortcut to Christmas.

A great ingredient to Christmas fun is the anticipation approaching Christmas. We may know some and we might know most of what we'll be getting for Christmas, but it's that anticipation of something we just don't know for sure or the complete surprise that brings out the wows! the yesss! or the whoopee! What does it take to keep the whoopee in Christmas? Basically, it is patience. The Bible says, "*For ye have need of patience..*" (Hebrews 10:36). This is one reason we feel a let down after Christmas – we don't have anything else to look forward to. That's why we should have goals throughout our year that we are willing to wait until the ripening moment comes to enjoy. Then we may, with excitement, go on to the next goal. In the same way there are no shortcuts to Christmas, there are no shortcuts to the things that really matter in life. If we break the rules and rush, we often miss the Christmas magic of the moment. Let me give you three Christmases to contemplate:

1. The Christmas of Moral Discipline

We live in a world that encourages everyone and especially our youth to open our presents early. The world tells us, don't wait until you are properly promoted; lie or cheat to get where you want to go. Seven years ago this month college football was traumatized by the sudden resignation of Notre Dame's Head Coach, George O'Leary. As a struggling young husband and father full of

ambition, O'Leary padded his biography by saying things such as having received degrees he never received. He went on to accomplish much in the history of football coaching. But in the very pinnacle of his success, when it was discovered that he lied to get to where he was going, was coerced under pressure, resign. The agony is heard in the closing statement of his resignation: "I pray that my experiences will simply be yet another coaching lesson to the youth of this country that we are all accountable for our actions and there can be no double standard. I appreciate the courtesy and consideration extended to me by the University of Notre Dame." For this otherwise charming leader among men, we learn the valuable lesson. If we break the moral rules – Christmas is over.

This application is also made in the matter of sexual discipline. It is not wrong to have sexual drive, but it is wrong when sex drives you. Many a person's impeccable life caves in at the time of compromise. The flesh will tell you go ahead and be satisfied now. God says wait: "*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication*" (I Thessalonians 4:3). The Devil never tells you how embarrassing it will be when your young spouse-to-be asks you, "Did you keep yourself for me?" The world never tells you of the lifetime problems of sexually transmitted diseases. And as you begin to buy your prescriptions of medicine with funds that could have purchased so many other things, you come to the realization...Christmas is over.

2. The Christmas of Work's Reward

The Bible says, "*He also that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster*" (Proverbs 18:9). A lazy man is looking for a shortcut to success. He wants to get his heart's desire without working to get it. In trying to find the shortcut, he wastes time, energy and life itself. Paul made this dogmatic statement: "*For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat*" (II Thessalonians 3:10). Solomon said, "*He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread: but he that followeth vain persons is void of understanding*" (Proverbs 12:11). If we work hard, we benefit. If we goof off and follow losers, will not eat the bread of satisfaction.

Although I do not know the full extent as to why American business has gotten into the trouble they are in, I know this much: many a man and woman who could have lived very comfortably by just playing by the rules of honesty, integrity and the golden rule forfeited everything because of greed. Just yesterday the news carried the story of one businessman who, through greedy practice, took four hundred million dollars from one source alone. Henry Ford was asked, "How much money would it take to make you happy?" His reply is a classic and revelatory of the human heart, "Just a little more." Many a tycoon and big business that did not play by the rules and patiently wait their turn, even as we approach December 25th are discovering that Christmas is over before it began. Here is a promise: "*Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean (obscure or unknown) men*" (Proverbs 22:29). A hard working man has Christmas throughout his year. Even in the setbacks beyond his control, he at least has the peace of mind that he did his best.

3. The Christmas of Christ's Coming!

Scripture that says, "*But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law*" (Galatians 4:4). God waited for at least four thousand years after Adam sinned to send the remedy for man's fall. The earth went through the flood. The earth suffered through the reigns of Babylon, Persia, Greece and finally Rome. Then when Christ came, many who were looking for Him wanted the overthrow of Rome and the establishment of a physical kingdom on earth. They were angered and upset that Jesus came to give peace in the sinful human heart first. "*Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world...*" (John 18:36).

For those who believe on Jesus, Christmas is just beginning. Although He had no room in the inn, He will gladly come into your heart through faith. And now we wait for the Prince of Peace to return as King of Kings! One day it will be Christmas for the world. Don't be anxious, "*Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain*" (James 5:7). Christ comes the first and second time on His terms, not ours; in His way, not our way. I say, Merry Christmas, even so come Lord Jesus!

- Pastor Pope -

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