



# CANYON HILLS

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Series: Christmas 2016

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## **Christmas**

**Dr. Steve Walker**

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Welcome to Christmas Eve. My name is Pastor Steve Walker. I know many of you are friends and family of people who attend this church regularly, and we don't know each other, so welcome to you. I'm glad you're here tonight. I don't know if you feel the way I do, you guys, but it feels like Christmas got here way quicker this year than any other year before.

I don't know if you feel that, but it seems like the kids just went back to school and we were trick-or-treating like a week ago, and here we are. Christmas is tomorrow morning, and it just amazes me how fast it got here. In spite of all the busyness that surrounds Christmas, I still love it.

The constant challenge we face every year is trying to keep the real meaning of Christmas attached to it, because both culture and a lot of our family traditions have added a lot of fun as well as a lot of mixed messages to Christmas, haven't they? Culture has done that. For some people, Christmas is all about the neighborhood light shows and the competitions.

For others, Christmas has a lot to do with that reindeer with the red nose, or the snowman that keeps melting, or the Grinch who hates everybody, or that elf that can burp really loud. For some people, that's what it's about. It's about all of those Christmas specials. For some people, it's about sending and receiving cards and those really, really long personal letters that get attached to them. Who was the first person who did that, by the way? Who started that tradition? I don't know, but for some people, that is a great part of it.

White elephant gift exchanges, ugly sweater parties... By a show of hands, how many of you had a gift exchange or some kind of an ugly sweater party this Christmas already? Let's see. Hold your hands up. Look at that! That is crazy! Okay, put them down.

How many of you did both? You did an ugly sweater party *and* a white elephant gift exchange? Okay, some of you. Yeah. It's a part of it now. Of course, who can forget the egg nog and the fruitcake? I mean, come on. Those are two really bad experiments that went horribly wrong. Somewhere along the line, those two things went bad.

Yet in this struggle we have, we're trying to keep Jesus as the main reason. I know Jesus gets an occasional token mention, but honestly, if it wasn't for the Bible and that great theologian, Charlie Brown, we'd probably never hear about Jesus at Christmas. I mean, he could just be taken out of the whole thing, and a whole lot of people might not even notice.

Tonight, I want us to open our Bibles. In fact, I know a lot of you didn't bring a Bible tonight. You just came from dinner or some event and you're sitting here, but there are Bibles under the seats all around you, and I want you to get one in your hands and open it to the gospel of Matthew, chapter 1.

The reason I want us to do this tonight is because I think sometimes we can kind of subtly think this whole Christmas thing was just something that evolved, that somebody, a long time ago, just got a tree and sat around it and told a story, and now here it is. Look what it has become: this giant commercial thing.

Yet I want you to know that is not the truth at all. Christmas had its beginning thousands of years ago, in the mind of God, and where we find that truth is in the Bible. The way we do it around here at Canyon Hills Community Church, when we read the Bible together, is we stand together. I'm going to ask you to stand out of sheer respect and anticipation that we are reading the very Word of God together. I'm going to read it. I want you to follow along. Matthew, chapter 1. Find verse 18, and then let's see it for ourselves.

**"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.**

**But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'**

**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."**

Father in heaven, it's in the name of Jesus that we're standing and gathered together tonight. We ask, God, that you would open our hearts and minds to the true, deep, wonderful, eternal meaning of Christmas.

God, I pray for those who are all around us this afternoon whose hearts are heavy, whose Christmas this year is going to be different, sad, or lonely due to a lot of reasons you know. I just

pray that even tonight, before they walk out of this room, you would begin to restore the joy and the peace that come from you being our heavenly Father. God, we love you and we trust you. Now have your way. In Jesus' name, amen.

So, there it is, right in front of us, in the words of the angel: "**...he will save his people from their sins.**" Wow! Now, this begs the question...*What is it about our sin that we so desperately needed to be saved from it?* What is so wicked about sin that God would take on flesh and blood to become one of us in order to save us from it?

Now, for a lot of you, this message I'm about to share with you is going to be the best reminder ever, and the reason that is is because it's the real Christmas meaning that provides us with our eternal hope. So, you're going to be encouraged, once again, to hear the truth about Christmas, but for some of you, maybe not so much. At least, not yet.

It has been my prayer and hope that by the time we're done in the next few minutes, Christmas is going to become different for you forever. I want to take a few minutes to answer the question...*What is it about sin that only Jesus can save us from it?* Let me give you a few things to think about. The Bible tells us...

1. *Sin darkens our heart.* One of the devastating effects of sin is that it turns our motives, passions, and desires all inward. Everything becomes about *me*. Rather than my heart being ruled by God and motivated by God's honor, my heart, because of sin, becomes enslaved to my wants, my needs, and my feelings.

This goes all the way back to the first sin, in Adam and Eve, in the garden, doesn't it? You remember Satan tempted them by making that forbidden fruit all about them, all about their benefit, and all about their prosperity. If you think about it, every time we sin, it's an effort to get what we want. It's an effort to get what we think we deserve and what we believe is our right.

You know when that first shows up in our lives, don't you? You know when we first notice that? About 18 months to 2 years old. That's when it becomes very evident that the heart is already darkened by sin. Any parent in the room who has ever raised a toddler would say amen to that, right?

When you peel it all back, it comes down to this: "I do what I do because I want what I want. I'll lie. I'll steal. I'll gossip, because I want what I want. I'll abuse drugs and alcohol because I want what I want. I'll commit adultery because I want what I want. I'll be greedy, jealous, and envious, because I want what I want. I'll get angry and impatient because I want what I want, and if you get in my way, then we're going to have some kind of a conflict."

Here's how dark it is. Sin deifies me and it demonizes you. That's what sin does to the heart. This devastating darkness of sin is that it turns us all into worshipers of ourselves, and if we do this long enough, we convince ourselves we're our own god. That explains why so many people reject Jesus. You see, he claimed to be the only one true God.

He said, "Unless you believe I am your Lord, I am your God, and I am your Savior... Unless you lay down your crown and your sword and pick up my cross, you will die in your sins." So, is it any wonder why so many people reject Jesus and yet so easily claim to worship or follow people like Buddha, Gandhi, or one of 300 million made-up Hindu or New Age gods?

Many people will invent their own version of God because these gods make no demands on our allegiance. They're all dead, so we could follow them and still be our own sovereign, selfish ruler. Yet our Lord, Jesus Christ, came to save us. He came to save us who were held captive by the darkness of our own hearts.

Jesus said these famous words in John, chapter 8: "**...Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'**" Jesus had to come save us because he's the only one who can shine a light into our dark hearts and show us the absolute futility of worshiping ourselves.

The Bible tells us it's appointed once for a man to die and then to face the judgment. You see, every human being is going to find out there is a God and he or she is not him. We could either find that out now and make a right decision or we can wait until we face God in the judgment and it will be too late.

2. *Sin hardens the heart.* It's the next natural progression of sin. Our hearts can become so hard that we lose sight of the sinfulness of sin. We can even all of a sudden start to think things we once considered as evil and bad are good now. Sin can harden our hearts so much that we start to think the things we used to think were good, pure, and right are actually bad things now. Sin makes us obstinate and it even causes us to do evil things like accusing God of being unfair. That's how bad and how far sin can take our hearts.

Here's how it worked on some of us before we were saved. We would say thing to ourselves like, "I know I'm not perfect, but *my* sin isn't all that bad. I mean, look around. There's a lot of ugly out there." We rate ourselves on a curve. We can actually get to the point where we believe we don't sin at all.

If our heart gets hard enough, we can even convince ourselves that there's no such thing as sin, and we all really are in charge of our own morality. We can make up in our own minds what we believe is right or wrong and there's no consequence to that. That's how hardened sin can make a heart.

Yet remember what Scripture says about that. In 1 John, chapter 1, it says, "**If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us.**" I'm not really smart, but I'm pretty sure calling God a liar can't end up really good for that person. I'm just thinking.

Jesus is the only one who can save us from the deceptive, heart-hardening power of sin. Jesus said these amazing words: "**...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**" Later on, in the same gospel of John, Jesus is on trial, right before his crucifixion, and he says this

about the truth to Pilate: **"For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth."** What truth? What specific truth can set us free? To what truth did Jesus come to bear witness?

I think the one that's appropriate for Christmas is, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** All of our sin... When Jesus died on the cross, he paid for every one of our sins with his own blood, and Christmas allows us to celebrate the truth that only Jesus can save us from the deceptive power of sin. By his love and his sacrifice, our hard hearts were transformed into grateful, loving hearts toward God. Only a Savior can do that.

3. *Sin separates us from God forever.* This is the most devastating effect of our sin, and it goes all the way back to the garden, of course. You remember, before Adam and Eve sinned, they were in perfect fellowship with God. What made the garden Paradise was not that they had TV without commercials, no traffic, or all the desserts they wanted without calories. That's not what made the garden of Eden Paradise.

What made it Paradise was the unhindered presence, provision, and protection of God. They had absolute access to God and all of his love, protection, and provision, but when they rebelled against God, sin broke all of that. They were cast out of the garden and they had to work the earth to produce their own food and protect themselves. Shame, condemnation, conflict, and death entered the human race for the first time.

That's why the Bible explains it this way in Romans, chapter 5: **"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men... For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation [to all]..."** Why? Why such devastating consequence to sin? Why such devastating condemnation for the hearts of all mankind because of sin?

Let me answer that question once and for all. Here's why. It's a simple truth. *God is holy.* God is holy, without one imperfection or impurity in thought, word, or deed. That would help make sense what the prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 59, when he said, **"...your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear..."** We cannot be in the presence of God with unforgiven, unremoved sin.

Of all the effects of sin, this is the most devastating. Think about it. If God is our greatest good, then being separated from him is our greatest loss. The Bible describes this separation this way: **"...the wages of sin is death..."** Plain and simple. The payment of our sin is death. It's a spiritual death in the sense that we have no way to come to God or go to heaven because our sin condemns us in the presence of a holy God.

This is where the good news of Christmas shines the brightest, you guys. Listen to what Jesus said. He said, **"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not**

**condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."** That would be the Jesus of Christmas.

In other words, before we were saved by Jesus, our sinful, unbelieving hearts were already condemned and kept us separated from God. Yet God, in his infinite love, refused to give up on us. The apostle Paul rejoiced with this. He said, **"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."**

God shows his love for you and me, for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus took all of our sin upon himself and suffered and died for it. He paid the price and exchanged our sin for all of his righteousness, saving us from the coming wrath and judgment of God. So, we have one of the most powerful promises in the Bible, and at Christmastime, it is most applicable.

Romans 8:1: **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** That's Christmas. You don't see that verse in the Christmas story, but that is the result of Christmas upon the hardened, darkened, separated heart, and that's why we love Christmas. That's why Christians get all giddy and silly at Christmas. This is the reason.

I want to ask you a question. I know for many of you in this room, this is an amazing, wonderful reminder again of why Christmas is so meaningful, but for some of you right now it's no accident or coincidence that you're sitting in church on Christmas Eve 2016 and there's some guy standing up here you've never seen before in your life, and for the first time, possibly, Christmas is making sense and you feel the hope of it.

I want to give you an opportunity to receive the greatest Christmas gift you'll ever receive, and that is salvation and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It's not mystical. It's not magical. You don't have to do anything weird. You don't have to shave your head. You don't have to start talking silly and acting weird, but if you really sense in your heart, "There is a separation between me and God and now I get it, now I know why," all God asks is that you believe in your heart, confess with your mouth, and receive him.

I'm going to lead you in a prayer, and if you sense, "Hey, preacher. If you're right, I have some business to do with God this Christmas," I'm going to ask us all to bow our heads right now. Quietly and respectfully, just stay respectful. There are people all around you right now whose hearts are beating fast and whose minds are racing. It may be time, tonight, for you to admit it.

Your prayer will sound something like, "God, I'm a sinner. I'm separated from you and I just believe only Jesus can save me." If you sense those are some of the feelings you have going on in your heart right now, I'm going to lead you in a prayer, and I'm just going to let you repeat it after me, just quietly between you and God. Right now, God in heaven sees your heart. With your head bowed and in quiet, if this is your desire, pray these words.

Dear Jesus, I admit I am a sinner and separated from God. I believe you lived a sinless life and died on the cross for my sins, and I believed you rose from the dead and are alive today. I ask

you to forgive me of all my sin and to cleanse me from all my wrongs, and I submit to you as my Lord, as my God, and as my Savior forever. Thank you for dying on the cross for me. Amen.