

# *The Sanity Clause*

November 24, 2019

Good morning everyone. We're glad you're here with us whether you're in the auditorium, the café or watching via livestream.

And by the way, if you're watching on livestream, just a heads up that we're having to do some testing with the interface between our North Heartland app and our stream provider, and you might experience an interruption or two.

So ... Santa Claus *is* coming to town and very, very soon. Are you ready for that?

I mean, it's not even Thanksgiving but most of us are already gearing up for the Christmas season which, I suppose, unofficially launches with Black Friday.

At that point, if you're like most people ...

- You'll begin following the same script you follow every year.
- You'll begin making the same emotional, relational, financial (and maybe even spiritual) commitments you make every year.
- And you'll pack your schedule (and credit cards) full in an effort to meet the same expectations you try to meet every year ... which can be summed up in this statement:

**"This can be the most wonderful time of the year *if* ...**

*"Your days will be merry and bright if ...*

**... you'll buy this, go there, do that ... and, of course ... do whatever it takes to make everyone happy!"**

It's like there's an unwritten cultural contract we enter into every year; a "holiday quid quo pro" so to speak ...

*Do all these things and you'll enjoy a successful and fulfilling holiday season.*

Unfortunately, for many of us, our desperate attempts to live up to the conditions of the contract often look a little like this scene from *Christmas With the Kranks*.

**Video Clip – The Kranks: Hickory Honey Ham (2)**

<< MULTIMEDIA NOTE: THERE IS A VERY BRIEF BLACKOUT AT 50 SECONDS >>

<<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>>

Not exactly what you'd call the "Christmas Spirit" is it?

But, for a lot of us, that's how we feel after ...

- Spending well beyond our means ...
- Adding even more to an existing pile (or mountain) of debt ...
- And wearing ourselves out physically and emotionally, trying to please everyone who makes a demand on our time.

That's how we feel after fulfilling our side of the Christmas Contract and, instead of ending up with "the most wonderful time of the year," it turns out to be ...

- The most expensive time of the year.
- Or the most stressful time of the year.
- Or even the most depressing time of the year.
- Or maybe all three of those.

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Now, I know some of you are thinking, "wow, I didn't know Rick was such a Scrooge. What a humbug!"

But I'm really not. I actually love Christmas – and Thanksgiving, too!

I just think it's so easy for us to "just do" ... what we've always done ... because we've always done it ... which then leads us to end up where we've always ended up – depressed, disillusioned and deeper in debt.

And I think we deserve something better than that.

I think *you* deserve better and *I* deserve better because *we were made for more* than to be just "spenders" and "consumers" and "partiers" and whatever else we're supposed to be at this time of the year.

And that's why I want to talk to you today about *adding* something to the Cultural Christmas Contract.

Call it the *Sanity Clause* ...

**A clause that says something like ...**

"As I engage in all of the activities that go along with this season, I am going to do so in a way that not only allows me to survive it (and maintain my sanity). I am going to do so in a way that allows me to

thrive *in* it and *because* of it.”

And that begins with a better vision for what this holiday season is and is not about.

## **A Better Vision**

And to describe that vision to you we need to look at the story of how the very first Christmas came about.

And the reason we can even do that is because those who knew Jesus of Nazareth and followed Him at the very beginning took great care to research these things and write them down so that future generations like ours would know about Him.

And, of course, as we say all the time, *the only reason they cared enough* to do that – the only reason anyone cared about how He was born – is because of the event we call The Resurrection: that after being executed on Roman cross and sealed in a rock wall tomb, three days later Jesus was alive again. And they talked with him and had dinner with him for six weeks before they saw him taken up to Heaven.

Without that event there’s no Christmas story; there’s no New Testament and there’s no “Gospel According to Luke” ...

... where we read in verse 26 of chapter one that ...

*God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.*

*The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.*

*“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

*The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. For nothing is impossible with God.”*

*Luke 1:26-27, 30-36 (NIV)*

Now, here’s what I want you to see.

In that culture (which was driven by honor and shame), for a woman to become pregnant out of wedlock was about the most terrible thing imaginable. There was only one thing worse in this department: a man *choosing to marry* a woman who was pregnant out of wedlock ... *with a child that wasn’t his* ...

... which was precisely the challenge facing Joseph, the man to whom Mary was engaged.

Matthew tells us that when Joseph heard from Mary that she was pregnant, he thought about breaking things off until an angel appeared to him and said, “Joe, what she’s telling you is legit. The child within her is *literally*

the son of God. So go through with your marriage even though it will be scandalous and humiliating.”

And he did.

**Matthew tells us that ...**

*Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. Matthew 1:24 (NIV)*

Talk about breaking the cultural contract – both of them!

And they did it willingly. Why? How?

Let me show you.

After Gabriel tells her that her entire life is going to go in a direction she could have never predicted ...

**Mary says...**

*“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.”  
Luke 1:38 (NIV)*

Translation: “I will do whatever the Lord needs me to do in this difficult situation because *it’s not about me. I am just a servant.*”

That was Mary’s vision for her entire life.

And, based on his actions, I think it’s obvious that it was Joseph’s as well.

And I don’t know about you, but I am so glad it was. I’m so glad they put their hearts in that position of submission to God and to each other and to the child who would be born – and, in truth, *to you and me and the whole world.* Because of their vision, that child grew up to be our savior. Pretty amazing!

But the point I’m making today is that if we’re going to not only survive but thrive during this season with all of its challenges, it starts with adopting the same vision that Mary and Joseph had.

**“It’s not about me. I am just a servant.”**

“Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s – all of the activities and events and time and money – *none of that* is about me and what I want or what I think it ought to be like. It’s not about me.”

In fact, would you all say those first four words with me?

**“It’s not about me.”**

Feels good doesn't it? Let's say it again, this time with conviction.

"It's not about me."

Of course, it's much easier to say "it's not about me" than to actually *live* it because everything around us – the culture, our inborn propensity to sin and even Satan's minions are constantly telling us otherwise, and especially at this time of year.

"It *is* about you. You are the most important being. Your happiness is the most important goal.

"So you have *the right* to demand that the holiday season be done your way, according to your will. Control, manipulate, beg, whine, plead, sulk, explode, overspend – do whatever it takes to make your vision come to pass."

But that vision and that strategy is what turns "the most wonderful time of the year" into ...

- The most expensive time of the year.
- And the most stressful time of the year.
- And the most depressing time of the year.

So, part one of the better vision is that "it's not about me."

**Part two is that "I am just a servant."**

And, if you dare, say that part together with me: "I am just a servant."

Awesome!

But what does that look like? How does being a servant during this "most wonderful time of the year" work itself out in practical ways?

## **A Better Strategy**

This is a question I thought about several years ago when I personally got to a point where, quite frankly, I was sick of Christmas – at least the way I had been "doing it."

So I came up with a list of four goals that define the kinds of things I want to be doing be from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day. These together are my "strategic plan," so to speak, for implementing *The Sanity Clause*.

And I'm going to share these with you not only as an example of what you might do but also to *remind myself* that these next six weeks are not about me. I am just a servant. And I want God to use me and my time and my resources in whatever way He wants to.

Now, by personality, that attitude and that way of thinking – that vision – doesn't come natural to me. So, as you'll see, some of these goals are tailored towards my specific weaknesses ... which is why if you did this exercise for yourself, your goals might look different.

But here are mine.

Over the next six weeks because it's not about me – I am just a servant – one goal is to ...

### **1. Make things easier and more pleasant for others ... whether they appreciate it or not.**

And that last part is really important because a lot of times when we try to make things easier and more pleasant for others, especially at this time of year, it's really not about them.

We might say it is but, in reality, it's about us being recognized and appreciated for our effort in trying to make things easier and more pleasant.

For example, because we want to be seen as the perfect parent or the perfect son or daughter, we run ourselves and our kids into the ground by saying "yes" to everything.

- "Yes" to every party
- "Yes" to every school function
- "Yes" to every family function
- "Yes" to traveling all over the place
- "Yes" to spending money we don't have

And we won't say "no" when we *should* say no because "I just don't want the conflict with my parents" or "I don't want to look bad to my kids."

"I ... I... I..." It's still about us.

And if we keep giving in to that way of thinking, eventually we become bitter because we're not really serving. We're just using people to feed our own need for affirmation.

Instead, what I mean by "making things easier and more pleasant for others" is doing very simple things and doing them *with no strings attached* – with no need to be recognized or thanked or paid back in any way.

I'm talking about things like ...

- Avoiding arguments with people who I only see once or twice a year and, instead, being tolerant and gracious to them – even if they did vote for Trump ... or Hillary.
- Letting other people set the agenda instead of me.

- Pitching in to clean up after the typical holiday messes *without being asked*.
- Letting go of expectations that cause me and everyone around me stress; expectations like “of course there will be peace and quiet when all of my kids and grandkids come to stay with us.”

*Probably not going to happen.* And being a servant means that’s OK. That’s what it takes to have them here. And I want that.

Anyway, I think you get the idea. Being a servant means simple acts of service that make it easier and more pleasant for others ... with no strings attached.

Here’s my second goal. It’s to ...

## **2. Embrace disruptions to “the plan” as the hand of God directing me.**

This one is really hard for me because, when it comes to complex events and situations (like those that happen during this time of year), I like *having* a plan, *knowing* the plan and *sticking* to the plan. I don’t deal very well with *changes* to the plan, especially when I’m the last to know. (Some of you can relate to that).

At the same time, however, because I am a Christian – because I believe in Jesus and believe that God’s Spirit lives in me ...

### **I can trust the biblical proverb which says:**

*A person plans his course, but the Lord directs his steps. Proverbs 16:9 (NET)*

More personally, *I* make my plans, but the Lord directs *my* steps.

That means that when I make my plans and those plans are disrupted, instead of getting frustrated and upset a better reaction is, “you know, that might be God trying to direct me!”

So one of my goals over the next six weeks is to pay better attention when things inevitably change and ask “OK, God, how can I be a servant in this? Do you have a special assignment for me?”

And then just do whatever I sense in that moment.

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Now, I hesitate to tell you my third goal because some of you are going to hear this in a way I don’t mean it. You’re going to hear it as bragging or you’re going to think “oh, Rick is so spiritual.”

So, please trust that is not my purpose whatsoever because the truth is there was nothing spiritual about how this goal got on the list.

What happened is that I got so jaded and disillusioned about Christmas that I was willing to try something radical; something that Jesus said would lead to blessing instead of bitterness.

I'll tell you what He said in a minute but, first, here's the goal.

**3. To spend half of our holiday budget on people and causes *beyond our family* (who already have everything they need).**

I'm talking about people who are less fortunate in general, people who are facing some kind of crisis and need help.

And I'm talking about organizations that help people in those situations as well as organizations like this church that are devoted to leading people to know, love and follow Jesus. That "cause" isn't as urgent or sexy as others but, given the state of families and culture in general, there's no question it's important.

Anyway ... as to how this became a goal ...

Many years ago, Jetta and I reached the point where we could buy pretty much anything our family wanted or needed at any time (within reason, of course).

- Need a new phone? Go buy it.
- Need clothes or shoes? Same thing.
- Want to take a trip somewhere? Put it on the credit card. We'll pay it off at the end of the month (and we do).

And because of that, Christmas for our family was just more of the same.

Literally. *More*. Of the same.

I thought "what's the point of buying presents at Christmas? We already buy 'presents' all the time. Our *whole life* is one big present! Plus Christmas is not *our* birthday. Why do we spend like it is?"

In addition, because my kids were older and had a little money of their own, the whole gift-giving thing had degenerated (in my mind) into exchanging lists of what we wanted someone else to buy for us that we could easily buy for ourselves.

Maybe I think too much, but it just seemed silly and superfluous at best; pretentious at worst. *Why didn't everyone just go buy what was on their own list and save the everyone else the hassle?*

Now, I'm not saying that my perspective was entirely accurate. That's how jaded I had become.

**It kind of reminded me of what Jesus was getting at when He asked:**



*"Do you think you deserve credit merely for loving those who love you? Even the sinners do that!" Luke 6:32 (NLT)*

*"If you do good only to those who do good to you, is that so wonderful? Even sinners do that much!" Luke 6:33 (NLT)*

By the way, Jesus wasn't saying that it's unimportant to love the people who love you and to be generous towards the people who love you. It is important. It matters.

*But ... there's nothing truly "special" about it because, as a father, a mother, a teenager or an adult child, a friend ... that's what you're supposed to do. That's what you ought to do. That's what pretty much everyone who has any sense at all does.*

If you want to do something really special, Jesus said, then go beyond what everyone with half-a-brain naturally does and be loving to people *who may not even know you and therefore cannot love you in return*; be generous to people *who have very little and therefore can offer you very little in return*.

And when you do that, Jesus said, something awesome will happen to you.

**When you begin to think and act that way, Jesus said ...**

*"Your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind [even] to the unthankful and to those who are wicked." Luke 6:35 (NLT)*

Anyway ... at that point, I went to my family and told them what I was thinking: that I wanted to re-do our Christmas budget so that about half of what we had been spending on ourselves went to people and causes *beyond our family*.

And they agreed.

And you know what? No one really misses the half of what we used to spend on ourselves.

More importantly, for me at least, the joy of "doing Christmas" – even the part that seems superfluous and a little pretentious – has returned.

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Now, again, as I said, I hesitated to share this goal because I don't want you to take it the wrong way. And I don't want you to feel pressure to do what we do *to the extent that God has enabled us to do it*.

But I *do* want to challenge you, especially if you're a Christian: don't spend every penny of your Christmas budget on your inner circle. And go beyond impulse giving. Pick a percentage and give it to serve people in

need and causes that make our world a better place.

Now, you can do that through North Heartland if you wish.

- Giving tree
- Hope Fund – full up but we'll take your donation
- Ministry and Ops fund – not sexy as I said before but if you look at the program you see we are running significantly behind and it is having an effect on our ministries.

Ok, here's the final goal I want to share with you this morning.

Over the next six weeks, because it's not about me - I am just a servant – one of my goals is to ...

#### **4. Invite people who do not know Jesus to Christmas events at NHCC.**

Surveys have consistently shown for years that people who do not participate in church are far more open to an *invitation to church* at this time of year than any other.

To say it more personally, *your* non-church attending friends and *mine* are very likely to say "yes" if we invite them to something we're doing.

And not to brag, but we do Christmas really, really well here at NHCC.

But the temptation for me and I'm sure for many of you (if you're a Christian) is to keep it all to ourselves. Just soak it all in without taking advantage of the opportunity this season brings.

That's why I need to be reminded that it's not about me. I am just a servant.

And I can serve others who don't go to church or don't know Jesus by inviting them to some of the really awesome things that are going to happen here over the six weeks.

For example ... there's this little project that starts next Sunday. Check it out.

#### **That's right, next Sunday we begin *Christmas at the Movies* with ...**

- The Polar Express
- Followed by "A Hallmark Christmas" (no specific movie, just watch any of their Christmas movies, they're all basically the same)
- Followed by Home Alone (the first one)

- And then Rudolph the Red-Nosed-Reindeer

Now, if you're new to NHCC, I should explain that in a movie series, each week we show clips from the movie to illustrate the storyline and then explain how the movie reveals a truth or a principle about knowing and following Jesus.

It's a lot fun and we enjoy doing it but, more importantly, it's almost always a high-impact experience.

In fact, there are so many people who are part of NHCC today who were not attending a church prior to coming to a "movie message." It's pretty incredible.

**The second invitational opportunity is the "Jingle Jam" which is going to happen Saturday December 7<sup>th</sup>.**

<SHANNON EXPLAIN>

**Third opportunity is Christmas Eve services, December 24<sup>th</sup> at 3:00 and 4:30pm.**

We picked those early times because it allows for people to still do "family stuff" later in the evening and, therefore, makes it more likely for people to say "yes" to an invitation.

Anything we should know about that Shannon?

**Finally, instead of "Pancakes and Praise" on Sunday December 29<sup>th</sup>, we're going to have "regular" services at the regular times ...**

... although we'll only be providing childcare through fifth grade instead of Adventureland and Student Ministry.

As much as I love what we did with Pancakes and Praise, truth is, it just isn't a good or welcoming experience for to those who are new to NHCC (people who started coming because you and I invited them to the movie series or Jingle Jam or Christmas Eve).

So we're going to move that experience to a Wednesday evening in January and do a regular service on the 29<sup>th</sup>. More details on that as we get closer.

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Now to help promote all of these events we have some special invitational materials, right Shannon?

One more thing and we'll draw this to a close.

**Our mission as a church – the reason we’re here in the first place – is to draw family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers *who don’t know Jesus and/or who are not meaningfully involved in a church into a life-changing relationship with Jesus and His Kingdom.***

And everything we just talked about is designed for all of us to invite *them* – not folks from Vineyard or Pleasant Valley or any other church. We love them, too, but we’re not doing all this extra work for them.

So, if NHCC is your church, I challenge you to begin thinking and praying about who you will invite.

- Who do you know who loves movies – especially Christmas movies – and who also does not go to church?
- Who do you know who has kids who would love the Jingle Jam – and who also does not go to church?
- Who do you know who doesn’t go to church on Christmas Eve?

So Shannon, talk about this little Christmas List card we have.

<SHANNON EXPLAIN THE CARD, THEN LEAVE STAGE>

## **Conclusion**

So let’s wrap this up.

We can spend all of our energy trying to live up to the “Cultural Christmas Contract,” or we can adopt the Sanity Clause which is based on a better vision, which is ...

**“It’s not about me. I am just a servant.”**

And since we have it on the screen, let’s say the whole thing together one more time. Ready?

“It’s not about me. I am just a servant.”

And you have to define what that looks like for you as an individual. I’ve given you some suggestions based on what it means for me, and if they are helpful to you by all means use them.

And you might want to write them down. I’ve put them in a note on my smartphone and on my computer desktop because it’s so easy to lose focus and get sucked back into the vortex that is the holiday season in this culture.

And I want more than that. You do, too.

And so, in just a minute we’re going to stand and sing a song which expresses that desire as well as a request for God to direct us and give us power as we release our expectations to Him. So, it’s a perfect fit for what we’re all about to enter into.

If you’re not a Christian you don’t need to participate in this if you don’t want to – you can just listen to the music

– but you’re certainly welcome to join in. Who knows? Maybe God will do something in response to you.

So, let’s all stand together and let’s sing.

### **CLOSING COMMENTS (1)**

1. Offering at the door
2. The Polar Express
3. Pray and invite

Endnotes