

**Christmas at the Movies**  
***Christmas Vacation***  
**December 2, 2018**

**Congregational Song – Joy to the World**  
**Announcements – Shannon**

**Feature – That’s What Christmas Means to Me /**  
**Offering**

Good morning everyone!

“That’s what Christmas means to me.”

If you’ve seen today’s movie, *Christmas Vacation*, you know that’s what it’s about: *what Christmas means to Clark Griswold.*

I’m curious – how many of you *have* seen it?

That's not surprising as *Christmas Vacation* has been around for almost 30 years now. It was released in December of 1989 and, in my opinion, it's by far the best of the *National Lampoon* "Vacation" movies ... which, honestly, may not be saying very much.

More importantly, at least for our purposes, it provides an excellent illustration of a *challenge* that every single one of us faces again and again throughout our lives – a challenge which is most frequently and acutely felt at Christmas.

**Let's call it "when the *i-deal* meets the *real deal*."<sup>i</sup>**

When the *i-deal* meets the *real deal*; when our hopes and dreams and desires of "what

ought to be” crash into “what really is.”

And we’ll talk more about that in a bit but, first ...

## **Why Movies?**

For some of you, “movies in church” might be a new experience, so I want to explain why we’re doing it. This is not our typical approach but we believe it’s a worthy departure from normal for two reasons:

1. *Everyone loves a good story.*

And a movie – if it’s any good – is good at telling a story. It grabs our attention and engages us in a way that opens us up to new thoughts and feelings.

2. *The founder of the our faith, Jesus of Nazareth, was great at telling stories that opened people up to new thoughts and feelings.*

In fact, the historical record shows that Jesus frequently attracted huge audiences to hear what He had to say, in part, because He was entertaining (which made Him very different from the other spiritual leaders of His day).

Of course, Jesus' stories were meant to accomplish much more than mere entertainment.

Often He would say "The Kingdom of God" – which is a shorthand phrase for "what our lives are like when God is in charge" ... Jesus would say "the Kingdom of God is like a farmer" (or a coin or a lamp or a seed or a

banquet or a traveler or a family).

And then He would tell an engaging story using that familiar imagery to help people understand and feel in a new and fresh way a truth about God ... or themselves ... or the world in which we live.

And that's what we're trying to do in this series – to use the familiar imagery of these “holiday classics” to engage you and then *lead* you to understand and even *feel* spiritual truth in a new and fresh way.

So, let's get started!

## **Christmas Ideal**

And let's begin by looking at “Christmas

ideal” ... or, in other words, “what Christmas means to Clark Griswold.”

As the story begins, Clark and his family have spent hours and hours driving and hiking across snow-covered mountains in search of the perfect Christmas tree when, *suddenly*, it appears!

Check it out.

**Video Clip – 01 THE PERFECT TREE (1.3 min)**

(Begin) Clark: “There it is!”

(End) Clark stunned (because he doesn’t have a saw)

The height of the tree is a metaphor that clues us in to just how lofty Clark’s hopes are concerning Christmas.

And, the fact that he forgets the saw is a hint that this story *is* going to be about what happens when the *i-deal* meets the *real deal*.

As the movie unfolds, it becomes apparent that the ideal Christmas in Clark's mind requires three things. Three expectations must be met. As we go through them see if any apply to you.

The first is revealed soon after Clark has spent even more hours cutting and shaping the tree so it will fit in the living room.

Let's watch.

**Video Clip – 02 PILLOW TALK (1.5 min)**

(Begin) Ellen: "Did I tell you I talked to my mother today?"

(End) Ellen: "... graduations ..."

In spite of Ellen's misgivings, the big old-fashioned family Christmas is a "go" and everyone will soon arrive.

**1. So, Clark's first expectation of the ideal Christmas is *relational*.**

His family and Ellen's family might be jerks the rest of the year, but, in Clark's mind, Christmas will magically transform them into beings of sweetness and light.

We can relate to that because all of us want that same thing, right?

In a few weeks, we'll gather with family and friends hoping, wishing and even praying that maybe this year, things will be a little smoother than in the past.

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Ok, let's look at Clark's second expectation.

Through a bizarre series of events (which we don't have time to go into), he gets locked in the attic while the rest of the family goes shopping. With nothing else to do until they return, Clark starts looking around and discovers some home movies from his childhood.

Check it out.

**Video Clip – 03 MEMORY LANE (1.8 min)**

(Begin) Camera pans to Clark watching movies

(End) Clark falls through floor

And *that* is yet another foreshadowing of what's going to happen when the *i-deal* meets the *real deal*.

**2. Anyway ... this represents Clark's *emotional* expectation of the ideal Christmas.**

And we can relate to that, too, right?

After all Christmas is supposed to be the hap-hap-happiest time of the year when everyone is in “the Christmas spirit” ... when everyone, as Nat King Cole sang it, is “sharing so much joy and cheer.”

And we invest a lot of time and money in this expectation.

- We decorate the house
- We go to Christmas parties

- We eat special kinds of food
- We listen to Christmas music (that we've heard hundreds of times before)
- We watch holiday movies (like *Christmas Vacation*)

... all in hopes of experiencing at least a taste of that “wonderful feeling.”

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So, in Clark's ideal Christmas (and in ours), there's a relational expectation and an emotional expectation.

Here's the final one.

**Video Clip – 04 CHRISTMAS BONUS (0.9 min)**

(Begin) Clark is playing with model of swimming pool

(End) Clark: “Same to you.”

Clark is worried because he’s already put down \$7,500 to have a swimming pool put in. So, he’s not just *hoping* for his bonus check to cover it. He *needs* it to cover the expense.

**3. And this represents Clark’s *material* expectations of the ideal Christmas ...**

... which, again, most of us have, too.

The material expectation ...

- Is why retail stores put up their Christmas displays by the first of October.
- It’s why we shop til we drop on Black

Friday.

- It's why we spend money we don't have on things people don't really need.

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So when it comes to “Christmas ideal” ... when it comes to “what Christmas means to Clark Griswold” *and to most of us* ... the expectations are relational, emotional and material.

## **The Real Deal**

And it takes about the first third of the movie to set these up. But then, at that point, the *i-deal* begins to meet the *real deal* for Clark Griswold.

For example, after Clark has spent hours and hours putting up Christmas lights – 25,000 of them stapled to every square inch of his house – he gathers everyone on the front lawn for what he thinks is going to be an emotional “Hallmark moment.”

But watch what happens.

**Video Clip – 05 LIGHTING DUD (1.6 min)**

(Begin) Clark singing “Joy to the World”

(End) Clark: “Thought so.”

But it gets even worse for Clark.

Not only do his *emotional* expectations take a hit, his starry-eyed dreams of a perfect family Christmas – his *relational* expectations – begin to fall apart with the

arrival of an unexpected and not-so-welcome guest.

Check it out.

**Video Clip – 06 COUSIN EDDIE (1.6 min)**

(Begin) Clark: “Can’t believe you’re actually standing here ...”

(End) Clark chokes and spits out eggnog

Personal opinion – the scenes with Cousin Eddie are the best. 😊

Finally, after waiting for what seems to be an eternity, Clark’s bonus arrives “special delivery” on Christmas Eve. He’s encouraged, believing that *this* will make up for everything else that’s gone wrong.

But watch what happens.

**Video Clip – 07 BONUS DUD (1.5 min)**

(Begin) Clark: “I’m sorry if I’ve been a little short...”

(End) Clark: “That it is indeed.”

And now, we’re three for three. Clark’s *material* expectations have bitten the dust, too.

Clark’s “i-deal Christmas” has met the “real deal Christmas” and it’s a disaster; a conclusion which is summed up rather nicely in one slapstick scene.

After Clark’s original tree is burned to a crisp by a careless cigar, it’s discovered that the replacement tree is – how shall I put it – a little squirrely.

Let's watch.

**Video Clip – 08 THRESHOLD OF HELL (1.4 min)**

(Begin) Dad: “Squirrel!!!”

(End) Clark laughs maniacally

## **I-deal Meets Real**

Now, if you've seen the movie, you know that this is not the end of the story ... but I think it's a really good place to push pause (so to speak) and ask “what can we take away from what we've seen so far? What's the point?”

I think one thing is overwhelmingly obvious and let's phrase it like this:

**When the *i-deal* meets the *real deal* the result is almost always disappointment.  
<repeat>**

And because that's true ... because the experience of the *real deal* almost never matches up with the vision of the *i-deal*, you'd better have a strategy to address that gap, or, like Clark, you'll end up at the threshold of financial, relational and emotional hell.

And that holds not just for Christmas but for life in general.

And some of us today know exactly what I'm talking about because we've been disappointed in all three of those areas.

- We've hoped for the ideal emotionally
- We've dreamed of the ideal relationally
- We've worked for the ideal financially

- We've even prayed for the ideal in all of them...

But the real deal we're living with is nowhere close.

And it's painful. It's discouraging. And we often wonder "what's the point?"

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One of the most fascinating – and somewhat depressing – writings in the Old Testament is the book of Ecclesiastes.

**It begins like this:**

*"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."  
Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV)*

Not exactly the most encouraging way to start a book!

But it makes more and more sense as the Teacher goes on to explain *why* he has come to that conclusion.

Much like Clark Griswold (and many of us), this Teacher (who, as it turns out, happens to be King Solomon of Israel) has pursued with great gusto the things he believes will produce the ideal life.

And being King, he has the power and the means to do that *to excess* – far beyond anything Clark Griswold (or you and I) could ever dream of.

Everything Solomon desires, he pursues

without limit:

- Wine, women & song
- Friends, family & fortune
- Knowledge, accomplishments & fame

Solomon spends years going after all of it. And the book of Ecclesiastes details how he goes about it in each of those areas.

However, *unlike* Clark Griswold, Solomon actually *succeeds*. He attains his goals – every single one of them.

Turns out that the “real deal” for him is the i-deal just as he envisioned it in his mind ... *but* ... amazingly, sadly, depressingly ... *he* winds up in the exact same place as *Clark*!

Every single time, he concludes that the result is ultimately meaningless. It's lacking. It doesn't bring the fulfillment he thought it would.

When the *i-deal* meets the *real deal* – even when the real deal *measures up* to the *i-deal* – the result still is disappointment.

And we all know how this works.

For instance, let's say that you somehow escape all of the bad fortune that visited Clark Griswold. Let's say that this Christmas you actually experience the hap-hap-happiest holiday seasons imaginable.

When it's time to take down the decorations, throw away the candy and go back to school or work, how will you feel?

If you're like most people, you're going to feel a sense of satisfaction but there will also be a hollowness and an emptiness. There's going to be a feeling of disappointment that it's all over, maybe even a sense of meaninglessness and futility: "so is that all there is? What was the point?"

Actually, some of you don't need a perfect Christmas to experience that kind of disappointment because that's the way you feel right now. By all measures of this world, your life is ideal. You have everything that matters according to our culture:

- Great job
- Perfect spouse
- Beautiful children

- Fancy home
- Friends
- Wealth

And the list could go on and on.

But, sometimes, at the end of the day, you just feel like there's still something missing. And you, too, need a strategy to deal with that gap ...

... because when the i-deal meets the real deal – even when the real deal *measures up* to the i-deal – the result is almost always disappointment.

## **Christmas Lampooned**

Now, the thing about Ecclesiastes is that,

even though it's a fairly depressing book, Solomon *does* come to a positive and helpful conclusion ... which we'll get to shortly.

But before we do, I think it's worth pointing out that Clark Griswold – who (as we'll see) is meant to represent all of us and how our culture approaches Christmas ... Clark Griswold *does not* come to that kind of conclusion.

Now, to be sure, the movie *does* have a happy ending with all the warm fuzzies you would expect from Hollywood *but* I promise you ... it's not what it seems. Clark's conclusion is *not* positive and it's *not* helpful.

To see that, you have to read between the lines a bit, which means remembering that the title of the movie isn't simply

“Christmas Vacation.” The title of the movie is *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

Anyone ever heard of *National Lampoon* – the folks behind the making of this movie?

**<pic> *National Lampoon* was a monthly magazine published from 1970 to the early 1990s.**

Its purpose was to provide (and I quote) “a liberating response to a rigid and hypocritical culture.”

Because the magazine’s founder, Douglas Kenney, was supposedly able (and again I quote) ...

... “to spot a comical hollowness and rot in the society he and his peers were trained to join ... its writers joyfully

targeted every kind of phoniness.”<sup>ii</sup>

**... which makes sense because the word “lampoon” means to “publicly criticize (someone or something) by using ridicule, irony, or sarcasm.”<sup>iii</sup>**

That’s what their magazine did and that’s what their movies do ...

... meaning that *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* is meant to be a public criticism and ridicule of the way we, as a culture, celebrate Christmas with Clark Griswold as “exhibit A.”

**As one reviewer recently put it:**

“[Christmas Vacation] is an *anti*-holiday film, an *anti*-classic. It doesn’t embody the warmth and compassion encouraged by the season; it *curdles*

them.

## Slide

“It’s a comedy, but a cruel and contemptuous one, mean-spirited and unashamed. This is the secret of its longevity.”

## slide

“*Christmas Vacation* has endured for 25 years because it articulates a sentiment we all share but dare not speak: Christmas [meaning ‘the way we celebrate it’] is terrible.”<sup>iv</sup>

And the reason it’s terrible is because, as the movie so sarcastically illustrates, we pursue it to excess without comprehending or even

seeking to comprehend its full meaning.

In fact, the tag line of this movie could be the same as the opening words of Ecclesiastes:

*“Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly  
meaningless! Everything is  
meaningless.”*

... a conclusion which becomes obvious as Clark’s Christmas mercifully comes to an end.

As he and his family stand on “the threshold of hell” Cousin Eddie decides to take matters into his own hands.

- He kidnaps Clark’s boss, brings him to the Griswold house
- Where the boss realizes the error of his

ways

- And agrees not only to reinstate everyone's bonus
- But also to increase Clark's by 20%.

Just then, however, the SWAT team shows up to rescue the boss, but he decides not to press charges because he's been such a jerk.

And just *then*, Eddie's kids see something outside that gets everyone's attention.

Let's watch.

**Video Clip – 09 WHAT IT MEANS TO ME (0.8 min)**

(Begin) Ruby Sue: "Look!"

(End) Clark: "Now I know what it means to me."

And that one line – "now I know what it

means to me” – is the most important statement in the entire movie.

It sounds so profound but, in fact, it actually functions as the ultimate sarcasm – the ultimate *ridicule* – because, as we’ve seen again and again, Clark has shown zero interest in and zero comprehension of what “the Christmas Star” – the *spiritual* dimension of Christmas – means.

And if there is any doubt about that ... any doubt that his “epiphany” is actually meant to lampoon his shallowness and ours, that doubt is wiped away when Grandpa Lewis immediately follows it with this critically important observation.

Check it out.

### **Video Clip – A0 PLAY BALL (1.0 min)**

(Begin) Lewis: “That ain’t the Christmas Star, Gris ...”

(End) Grandma: “Play ball!”

Clark’s “Christmas Star”? It’s just the buildup of gas; gas from the raw sewage Eddie had been dumping from his RV into the storm drain.

You can’t get much more sarcastic and cynical than *that*!

## **Concluding the Matter**

So, when it comes to how we might handle the disappointment that almost always happens when the *i-deal* meets the *real deal* (whether it concerns Christmas or life in general), there’s no help coming from Clark

Griswold and *Christmas Vacation*. He and it illustrate the problem not the solution.

For *that* – the solution – we need to look again to Solomon who, as we saw earlier, faces the same kind of disappointments but, at the end of his story, comes to a much different conclusion.

**He says ...**

*“Here is the conclusion of the matter:*

*Fear God and keep his  
commandments, for this is the duty of  
all mankind.*

*For God will bring every deed into  
judgment, including every hidden  
thing, whether it is good or evil.”*

*Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NIV)*

Whereas all Clark has focused on is the relational, emotional and material, Solomon says there is another dimension – a spiritual dimension – which is even more important; even more foundational.

And attention to that dimension, he says, is the answer to the meaninglessness and disappointment that seems to go along with being human.

But why is that?

**It's because the spiritual dimension roots your life in something that transcends your own existence – your emotions, your relationships and your material interests.**

As the great Catholic theologian Augustine once prayed, “You created us for Yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they

find their rest in You.”

To put it in more practical terms, the ideal life (which would include the ideal Christmas) is not only emotional, relational and material (and it is all of those things and they are good, given to us by God to be enjoyed).

**The ideal life is spiritual, too!**

And therefore, a wise strategy is to give attention to that dimension.

How do you do that?

Well, Solomon tells us (and his advice is later echoed by Jesus of Nazareth as well).

He says “fear God and keep his

commandments for this is the duty of all mankind.”

... which sounds a little strange to us but to “fear God” is not to be afraid of Him. Rather, it means to stand in awe of Him, to revere Him.

So, Solomon is saying “Respect God as God and live the way He intends for human beings to live. This is what you were made for. Recognize there is more to your life than just your life. Embrace the spiritual. Give attention to that dimension.”

Now, having said all of that, I’m aware that some of us here today have never done that before and some of us are at least somewhat skeptical.

So here's my proposal. *Try a little experiment this Christmas.*

In addition to pursuing the emotional, relational and material aspects of the season – all of which are valid and important – I suggest you try two things that will increase the spiritual dimension of your experience.

**1. Make time to *worship*, both formally and informally.**

Obviously, you can worship here or any other church for the next three Sundays leading up to Christmas but the best opportunities happens on Christmas Eve in churches all over the country, including this one.

I encourage you to plan now to take

advantage of it, because there's nothing like a Christmas Eve service to set the whole tone and to root your experience of Christmas Day in something that transcends the relational, emotional and material dimensions of Christmas.

If you'd like to join us, our services are at 3:00pm and 4:30pm. They're family friendly, each lasting about 45 minutes featuring great music, candle lighting and a very brief message.

As for *informally* worshipping, that just means finding time by yourself, alone, to remember and reflect on the Christmas story – on the birth of Jesus.

For example ...

- You could read the first few chapters of Luke's Gospel or Matthew's Gospel.
- You could dial up some contemporary (or traditional) sacred Christmas music on Spotify or whatever service you use and sing along.

One of the things I like to do on Christmas Eve after everyone is in bed is to turn on the TV and watch some of the midnight masses. For many years now, that has been an “alone time” between me and God.

At some point in that, I get moved by what I'm seeing and hearing and I literally fall on my knees in worship say something like “God, you are incredible. You came into this world because you loved me enough to be born as a baby and die on a cross for *me* – for

my sins. I can't comprehend that but I thank you and love you for it."

So, however you do it, my first suggestion (as part of an experiment to give attention to the spiritual dimension) is to make it a priority to worship this Christmas.

The second suggestion I have might sound a little strange but here it is.

## **2. Put Jesus on your Christmas shopping list.**

Jesus once said, "when you serve and care for and give to the least of my brothers and sisters – those who are in need and who can't do anything for themselves – you're actually doing those things to me" ...

... which, by definition is giving attention to the spiritual dimension.

So, what are some concrete ways to put Jesus on your list?

First of all, I recommend you set a percentage of what you spend on yourself and your family and then be prepared to give that amount.

If you're budgeting \$500, for example, you could set your percentage to 10% and spend \$50 on Jesus and \$450 on everyone else. I know people set their percentage at 50%. They spend \$250 on Jesus and \$250 on everyone else.

The percentage is an individual thing. Just pick a number that you can do cheerfully,

with joy.

Then the fun starts! You can give that money to ...

- An organization like Hillcrest Transitional Housing
- Or put some of it into a bell ringer's bucket
- Or pick up a name from the giving tree in the hallway as you come in the building
- Or contribute to the *HOPEFUL Blessing* project here at NHCC which helps us cover critical expenses such as rent, utilities and medical expenses for our

folks who are in need.

- Or you can personally identify an individual with a financial need and take care of it behind the scenes.

There are so many ways to give to Jesus! So many ways to give attention to the spiritual dimension.

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Well, I hope this little movie message has been helpful to you and that you'll remember that the ideal Christmas – and the ideal life – is not only emotional, relational and material. It's also spiritual.

And I pray that this year, you'll embrace that dimension more than ever before and you'll

find a depth and a foundation that sustains you whenever the i-deal meets the real deal in your life.

Let's pray.

**Feature – Where Are You Christmas?**

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

1. Next week – A Christmas Carol (the Patrick Stewart version)
2. Baptism in two weeks
  - a. info packet at the info center
  - b. meeting for parents and kids for elementary age
3. Stand for a blessing as we leave.

May the Lord bless you and keep you  
The Lord make His face to shine up you  
And may your life be more and more  
rooted

In Him and in His Son, Jesus  
Who we celebrate in this Christmas  
season.

Amen.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Awesome phraseology from <https://carsonnatural.com/soul-health/page/2/>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Lampoon\\_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Lampoon_(magazine))

<sup>iii</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/lampoon>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/movies/its-a-wonderful-strife-the-remarkable-legacy-of-national-lapoons-christmas-vacation>