

The Real, Real Meaning of Christmas
Pastor Dan Erickson
December 22, 2019

Have you ever attended a birthday party for Jesus? That is a popular Christmas tradition in some churches and Christian homes. Often this seems to be an effort to draw attention away from Santa and toys and instead celebrate the real meaning of Christmas, Jesus' birthday.

Folks, I think it is wonderful when children view Christmas this way. However, I think it is unfortunate when adults don't realize Christmas is much more than that.

To say that the real meaning of Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth is like saying Bob Dylan was a "folk singer." That is true, but it is missing some important things, such as a Nobel Prize for his song writing.

To say Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth is true, but it is only part of the truth. It misses the fact that Christmas commemorates the greatest event in human history.

Friends, this past summer marked the 50th anniversary of man landing on the moon – July 1969. Richard Nixon was President at that time. He declared, "The planting of human feet on the moon is the greatest moment in human history."

The next day, the President received a note from his friend, Evangelist Billy Graham. It said, "**With all due respect, Mr. President, the greatest moment in human history was not when man set foot on the moon, but when the infinite and eternal God set foot on earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.**"

Though the President's enthusiasm was understandable, Dr. Graham was totally correct. God coming to earth is an event that cannot be equaled.

Friends, the birth of Jesus may be the real meaning of Christmas; yet, if we are to celebrate Christmas in a way that truly honors the Lord, we need to move beyond Jesus' birthday and understand and embrace the real, real meaning of Christmas. That, friends, is the celebration of the incarnation – of God becoming human and coming to the earth in the person of Jesus.

A few years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a nativity display on city land in Pawtucket, NJ, was not illegal, but constitutionally permitted. That sounds good, but the logic behind the decision was more than a little disturbing.

The nativity display was deemed permissible, the court said, because it didn't serve a significant religious purpose. It was more of a "traditional" display.

Now, we may not agree with the court's logic, but it does remind us that it is possible to know the facts about Christmas, to talk about angels, shepherds, wisemen and a bright star, but still miss the real, real meaning of Christmas.

That is something we grasp only if we understand why Jesus came to this earth. **Knowing the "what" is not enough. We also need to understand the "why" of Christmas.** That is the real, real meaning. Let's pause and pray the Lord would enable us to hear and heed his truth today.

A text that will help us understand the real, real meaning of Christmas and one of my favorite verses is:

2 Corinthians 8:9 – For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Even though this verse is not part of the traditional nativity story, it is a wonderful Christmas text. It sheds great light on the true meaning of Christmas and reminds us that this story is not one of rags to riches, but of riches to rags.

The Apostle Paul first notes Jesus' position before his birth in Bethlehem. "Though he was rich." There are some folks who believe that before Bethlehem, Jesus didn't even exist. Yet, the Bible is clear. Though Jesus' birth occurred approximately 2,019 years ago, he always existed. Always.

As Oswald Chambers once said: "His birth in Bethlehem was not his origin, but only his incarnation."

That may seem a little strange, but it is something to which Jesus referred in John 8:58 when he said, "Before Abraham was, I am." What does that mean? Simply that Jesus always existed as the eternal Son of God.

The Apostle John speaks of this:

John 1:1 – In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John later makes it clear that "The Word" to which he refers is Jesus. Jesus is God, God the Son, and he existed as a member of the divine trinity, from the beginning, from before time began. **In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul simply states that Jesus was rich.** That is quite an understatement.

As the eternal Son of God, Jesus was the Creator and Ruler of the universe. Everything belonged to him. If we took every penny from every bank in the country, plus every bank in Switzerland, it would never even begin to equal the riches that belonged to Jesus Christ. As the eternal Son of God, the entire universe was his, but Jesus gave it all up.

And folks, that is another great understatement. The gospel accounts indicate Jesus was not from a wealthy family. He grew up as the son of a carpenter, a working class background. Jesus' true poverty, however, is explained here:

Philippians 2:6-7 – Though he was God, he did not demand or cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form.

Jesus' poverty is not so much that he was born in a stable, but that he was born at all. Now, each of us enters the world as a baby. We usually think of babies being very cute, soft and cuddly. Yet, it is tragic when an adult, because of a disease such as Alzheimer's, becomes like a baby and is unable to care for him/herself.

At Christmas, Jesus, the ruler of the universe, becomes a helpless infant. Someone had to feed him. Someone had to clothe him. Someone had to change his diapers. He had to learn how to crawl, walk and talk. The incarnation, God putting on human flesh, is the greatest

humiliation anyone can imagine, but it doesn't stop there. It includes:

Philippians 2:8 – And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

This is the ultimate humiliation. The eternal God is born, and then dies like a mere human being. In fact, he dies like a criminal.

Yet, this very cruel death is no accident. In Acts 4:18, Peter tells us that this was God's plan. But why? **Why would Jesus choose to become poor?** Why would he go from riches to rags? Why would he leave the glory of heaven for the manger of Bethlehem?

That makes far less sense than moving from Hawaii to northern Minnesota in January because you find the weather in Hawaii is boring.

So, why did Jesus do this? Paul says what motivates Jesus is his concern for us.

2 Corinthians 8:9b – For your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty you might become rich.

God became human for your sake, for my sake. He came to give his life, to die in our place. Many people don't grasp this. They often view Jesus as a great man, a great teacher, who sets an example for us to follow.

Professor Hadden Robinson said: "If that is why Jesus came, it is a cruel joke."

Because you see, friends, I really cannot follow Jesus' example of living life any more than I can follow Aaron Rodgers or Kirk Cousins' examples of how to play football. I lack the ability to do either. No matter how hard I try, I am never going to live the life of personal love like Jesus or throw a football like an NFL quarterback.

Yes, Jesus' example is often helpful. However, we must remember Jesus did not come to make bad people good or good people better. He came so that folks who are spiritually dead could become alive. Anything less misses the reason for his coming.

You see, folks, the Bible says that each of us because of our sin, has offended God. The relationship with him is broken, and without Jesus Christ we are spiritually dead. We face a future of eternal separation from God, which is also known as hell. The only solution to that terrible dilemma was for God to become human and die instead of us, in our place.

Many years ago, a man named Anselm wrote a book entitled, "Why God Became Man." It has a Latin title, but that's the English translation. He pointed out that even a perfect human being would be a substitute for only one other person. Only God could offer a sacrifice, a payment, in behalf of the whole human race. Yet, God cannot die. That is impossible. Thus, the only solution was for God to become human.

That led to the miracle of the incarnation. All that happened that first Christmas was for our benefit. Jesus came to earth so that we might become rich, that we might become God's children. This salvation is for our good. Yet, it is also for the glory of God. The Lord desires that we worship, honor, obey and enjoy him every moment of our lives. Folks, this is the real, real meaning of Christmas!

I suspect that sometimes we focus on the birthday of the little baby in the manger because we find the real, real meaning of Christmas a little too "heavy." The fact Jesus was born to die, the fact the crucifixion is the primary reason for the incarnation, does not really fit with the warm, sentimental atmosphere of most of our Christmas celebrations.

But if we neglect to include the cross (Jesus' death) in the Christmas story, we kind of miss the main point. It is like reading a mystery story that doesn't tell you "who done it." It is like telling a joke and forgetting the punchline. The most important part of the Christmas story is that Jesus became poor so that we could become rich.

C.S. Lewis said: "The Son of God became man so that men could become the sons of God."

Jesus became human so that he could die to save his people from their sins. Without this part of the story, Christmas doesn't really make sense.

There is one more question which I think is important to ponder. **Why did Jesus do this for us?** You might be thinking, "Well, Pastor Dan, you just told us that he became poor so we might become rich." Yes, I know, but why did Jesus do this for me? Why did he do it for you?

It is clear he didn't do it because we deserve it. He didn't do it because we are such wonderful, intelligent, good looking, charming people.

In Romans 5, we are told that God the Father sent Jesus the Son to die for sinners, to die for people who are his enemies. Jesus came and died for people who wanted nothing to do with him because they thought they were doing just fine without him. Why would he do that?

Well, our text does give us an answer: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.....grace!" Unmerited favor. Unmerited love. The Bible doesn't provide a reason beyond that. Out of his grace, God the Father sent Jesus the Son to save us.

Perhaps the hymn writer, Charles Wesley, has expressed the wonder of this best: "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God should die for me."

Now, of course, sometimes we may be a bit suspicious of this grace. I think of my friend Joe, for example. There is a guy at work (Bill) with whom Joe doesn't get along. It is pretty obvious they have negative attitudes toward each other.

Yet, this week Joe got a card from Bill in the mail. Inside was a check for \$200 and a note which simply said, "Have a Merry Christmas." Joe is not sure how to react. He kind of wonders, "What's the catch? What is Bill trying to get me to do? Is he trying to get something from me?"

Yet, with God, we don't have to ask that question. His grace is pure grace. He is the Creator, we are the creatures. He doesn't need us because he doesn't need anything. He, the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit, is truly self-sufficient. And he is perfectly happy without us. Yet, he chooses to offer his love. He does so simply because that is what he wants to do.

Folks, Christmas time should not be simply a celebration of Jesus' birthday. Christmas is about

more than a baby in a manger. **Christmas ought to be a time to celebrate the grace of God,** demonstrated so clearly in the incarnate God becoming human for our sakes. Yet, how do we do that? **How do we celebrate the real, real meaning of Christmas?**

In our society, it seems to be a victory when people say, “Merry Christmas,” instead of a generic, “Happy Holidays” or “Season’s Greetings.” I am happy when schools have decorated Christmas trees and sing about Santa Claus, rather than simply trying to ignore Christmas altogether.

Perhaps it is asking too much to want people to grasp the true significance of the incarnation – the real, real meaning of Christmas. But, by God’s grace, that is still my desire.

Here are some suggestions as to how we can celebrate the real, real meaning of Christmas:

#1 We need to begin by making sure we grasp the significance of Christmas.

Friend, when you look at a nativity display, like we have on the platform, what do you see? Do you think of a cute, little baby? Do you think of shepherds coming with their sheep to visit the manger?

Do you think of the wisemen, exotic travelers from a distant land? Or like the wisemen, do you see in that manger a King, the King of kings? Do you recognize this is not a birth occurring in the ordinary course of events, but instead a very special birth, with a very specific purpose?

This baby was born so that he might live in perfect obedience, fulfilling the will of his Father. His life would culminate with his death on the cross, as he died for our sins, for my sins and for your sins. And then, within three days of his execution, he rose from the dead, demonstrating he truly is the eternal Son of God and confirming his death was accepted by the Father as payment for our sins.

Friends, we only understand the real, real meaning of Christmas when God, through His Spirit, enables you to see who Jesus truly is, what he has accomplished for us and you place your trust, your faith in him as Savior and Lord.

It doesn’t matter how many carols you sing or how many Christmas programs you attend. Unless you know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, the one who has given his life for you, you are missing what Christmas is all about. If you are not sure what that means or whether you are truly trusting in the Lord Jesus, please talk to me.

#2 Take some time the next few days to think about and to ponder the deep mystery of God’s grace that was revealed when Jesus came to earth.

Think about the fact that even though in no way do we deserve it, God loved this world so much, loved you so much, that he gave his only begotten, one and only son. Think about that amazing grace, that amazing love. And as you do that, I hope you will realize that our minds will never be able to fully comprehend that grace and our lips will never be able to completely explain it.

Yet, your heart can overflow with joy if you experience that grace through Jesus. Let that be your reason for celebrating Christmas this year. Even if you have gone through some tough times in recent months, even if you are facing some real adversity right now, you can today, allow God’s grace to be a well of hope and joy from which you can draw.

Whether you are sitting in church, lying in bed at night, driving down the highway or singing in a show, give praise to God for that marvelous grace that is ours in Jesus Christ. And remember, that grace is at the heart of the real, real meaning of Christmas.

#3 Ask the Lord to help us communicate the real, real meaning of Christmas to people around us.

You can start with your family. Our children and grandchildren need to be taught not only that Jesus came to earth, but why he came. One simple suggestion is that sometime this week as you are sitting down for a meal with your family, take time to read aloud 2 Corinthians 8:9. Just read that one verse. Then take a few moments to talk about what it means, about what the real, real meaning of Christmas is. Talk about why this is the main reason to celebrate Christmas.

Also, let me suggest that sometime in the next week, ask someone who doesn't go to church regularly – a friend, family member, co-worker – ask that individual, "What do you think is the real meaning of Christmas?" Listen to their answer. If they ask for your opinion, then you can tell them:

2 Corinthians 8:9 – For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Now, I suspect some of you are thinking something like this: "Pastor Dan, I don't really want to change how I look at Christmas. It has always been just a nice, warm celebration for our family. Does it have to be a time where we get into all that theology?"

No, it doesn't have to be. You can choose to celebrate Christmas however you want. But, I am afraid you are missing out if you only see Jesus as a baby in the manger. There is more to Christmas than that.

And the more we grasp the real, real meaning of Christmas, the greater our joy will be. The more we understand what Jesus has accomplished for us, the more hope and peace will flow into our lives.

Folks, though the baby Jesus is nice, the eternal Son taking human form so he could die for our sins is far better.

Friends, let's make this Christmas what it is really, really meant to be: A celebration of God's grace revealed and experienced through Jesus Christ!