

THE APPLICATION OF CHRISTMAS

BIG IDEA: CHRISTMAS IS MORE THAN A HOLIDAY TO CELEBRATE. IT'S AN EVENT THAT SHOULD CHANGE OUR LIVES.

PURPOSE: YOUTH SHOULD COME AWAY FROM THIS SERIES MOTIVATED TO LIVE CONSISTENTLY WITH THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS.

INTRODUCTION

Activity: “Christmas Memories”. Divide into groups no larger than six. Now number off, from 1 to 6, by shoe size, from the smallest to the largest. Ask each person, starting with #1 of each group, to share with the group some of their favorite memories of past Christmas seasons. Suggest the memory could be humorous, a special time shared with friends or relatives, a special gift you received, a meaningful church service or devotional time, a memorable trip, a favorite song you sing or hear around this time of year, etc. This activity should set an atmosphere for reflecting on Christmas.

For many of us, Christmas is a time surrounded by happy memories. Memories of special gifts, special people, good food and seasonal activities. But if Christmas is not more than this, you may have a disappointing Christmas this year. You see, high expectations can bring the worst disappointments, as some people face fractured families, painful memories, financial difficulties, canceled activities, expected gifts that were never given. I suppose that's why counselors treat more depressed people during holiday seasons than at other times. What perspective on Christmas can make it meaningful whether our circumstances be good or bad?

As Christians, we have heard the Christmas story. But today I'd like us to reflect on the application of Christmas; that is, how it should impact us.

I. A Fresh Look at the Christmas Story

“...and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”(Luke 2:7)

ILLUSTRATION: Talk about a disappointing Christmas! Geoffrey Bull found himself spending Christmas Eve in a Tibetan inn, en route to a communist prison camp. As he walked into the stable to feed the horses and mules, in his own words, "My boots squashed in the manure and

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straw. The horrible smell of the animals was nauseating, and I thought, 'to think Christ came all the way from heaven to some wretched, eastern stable, and what is more, He came for me.'" Although it wasn't the Christmas he expected, perhaps it was one of his most meaningful. (When Iron Gates Yield, by Geoffrey Bull)

Look at the Christmas story again, especially Luke 2:7. Have youth try to describe what it would be like to have a baby, not in a hospital, but in a stable. And to be laid, not in a cozy baby bed, but in a stinky feeding trough. The real thing seems a lot less cozy than the quaint little manger scenes we recreate today!

II. How Christmas Should Change Us

Who will read Philippians 2:3-7 for us?

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Phil. 2:3-7)

Divide into your groups once more. We claim to believe that Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' birth. It's not a fairy tale, told to help us think kind thoughts. God really became a man. As a group, pretend that Jesus is sitting among us and you are planning ways to celebrate His birthday. Discuss what special things you could do this Christmas season to follow His example of humility. And be specific. Don't just say, "Visit an elderly person." Think of a real, live, elderly person you can visit, a specific sick person you can encourage, or a distant relative who would treasure a letter from you.

According to this verse, what quality did Jesus demonstrated in leaving heaven to be born as a man? (Answer: He showed humility of mind, willing to let go of the appearance of God in order to become not only a man, but a humble bondservant of a man.)

***ILLUSTRATION:** During the Communist rule of Central and Eastern Europe, many intellectuals who didn't believe in Communism were stripped of their positions and given menial jobs. In fact, relocated intellectuals were so plentiful that I heard of one window washing company in Prague that would hire only Ph.D's! Imagine yourself as a great intellectual, having rigorously trained your mind through years of study to do what you most wanted to do: teach others what you*

have learned. Now imagine the humility and disappointment of focusing all your brilliant efforts on how to best clean a bug off an office window. But the fall from professor to window washer doesn't even compare to Jesus' voluntary fall from His glorified heavenly state to His humble earthly state. Yet, He came down to that humble stable, not forced by government officials, but by His own choice, because He loved us.

ILLUSTRATION: *I heard of a man who refused to believe the gospel or attend church. But one day, while sitting in his house, he watched as some birds repeatedly tried to fly through his glass door, killing themselves in the process. "If I could only become a bird....," he thought. This might be the only way he could explain to the poor birds about the window. Then it occurred to him that this is exactly what Jesus did for us. As a result of this insight, he became a Christian.*

So, if you've never accepted Christ into your heart, it's pretty easy to see how that first Christmas applies to you. How could you turn your back on a God who left all the glory of heaven to be born in a feeding trough to poor, humble parents? He did it all for you. So for you, the greatest gift you could give is the gift of your life back to Him, accepting Him as your personal Lord and Savior. (Give lost youth a moment to express this decision in prayer.)

But what about the rest of us who know Christ? How does all this apply to us? (Look back at the Philippians passage.) Jesus is not expecting us to become birds, cockroaches or pigs. He simply wants us to act humbly toward other people. Since Jesus humbled Himself, we should humble ourselves before others, regarding others as more important than ourselves, looking out for the interests of others. And the humble person doesn't just reach out to the lovely or deserving or delightful people. He or she gives to those who can't give a gift back, and visits that lonely person who no one else thinks to visit.

Is your idea of Christmas more what you will get, or what you will give? Is your expectation to be loved by your relatives and friends, or to make sure that they feel loved?

ILLUSTRATION: *Jim became a Christian while he was a high school student. One day his junior or senior year he noticed that a classmate of his, Marie, always sat alone for lunch. (In Southern California, students often eat lunch outside because of the mild weather.) He asked her if he could sit with her. She seemed a little uncomfortable, but said yes. Later, she asked why he decided to sit with her. Her response? She said that no one had sat with her since the 9th grade. There are many Maries out there tonight, hurting and alone. Some may be your relatives, or neighbors, or schoolmates. Couldn't we forget about ourselves, the gifts we want, and the attention we hope to get, leave all these expectations behind, and reach out to someone in need this Christmas, like Jesus did for us?*

III. How This Christmas Can Be Different

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION: *A moment ago we pretended that Jesus was among us. One day some*

small children were being interviewed in their school by a radio announcer. He asked them the question, 'What would you do if Jesus were here?' One child responded, 'He is here.'" This child realized what we all ought to know. What we were just pretending in our group discussion is actually true. Jesus is among us. He was listening to us plan His birthday season. Will you follow through with your plans and adopt a lifestyle worthy of the Christ whose coming to earth we celebrate?

SHARPENING YOUR AX APPROPRIATE GROOM AND DRESS

What should we wear when we speak to youth? Those of you who looked at the title and almost didn't continue are probably the ones that need it most. You may not realize what your dress says to your kids.

For me, the bottom line in dress is, "How can I dress so as to not distract from my message?" The answer to this question can only be found by knowing your target group (and perhaps asking a few reliable informants.) I take my cue from the Apostle Paul, who said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." (I Cor. 9:22) Paul put his own desires secondary to the greater goal of reaching others for Christ. To the Jew he became as a Jew. To the Gentile he became as a Gentile. For Hudson Taylor, that meant dressing as a China man to reach China men. Does that mean that I must dress like youth in order to reach youth? Not necessarily.

If I, as a forty year old man, were to dress on the cutting edge of youth fashion, some youth might think I am cool (probably all the fourth-graders and below), but most youth would see me as trying desperately to be something I'm not. They would be embarrassed. They want me to be authentic, comfortable with who I am. But this, too, has its limits.

If "who I am" is an upper-middle class preppie, but God calls me to reach a group of lower class inner city kids, I may need to become something different in order to keep from offending them. If they see all fashionably dressed people as rich snobs, I put a stumbling block before them by dressing fashionably. Like a good missionary, I must know my target audience.

While teaching an inner city bible study, one of my kids told me he had invited an evangelist from his church. Sure enough, into this teen night club walked a stereotypical evangelist in a three piece suit. We allowed him to speak, but he missed the audience. To these kids, he looked like an alien.

Some leaders suggest dressing a notch above their youth. If students wear cut off blue jeans and t-shirts, the leaders wear nice shorts, or blue jeans and a golf shirt. They suggest that this gives the idea of a little more authority and age, while not appearing totally separate from youth.

Whatever the case, let's put aside any ideas of wowing kids with our clothes or hair. And let's put aside, if need be, our personal preference. Have you asked your youth what your style of dress says to them?

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INTRODUCTION

“Christmas Memories Discussion”

I. A FRESH LOOK AT THE CHRISTMAS _____ (Lk. 2:7)

“Christmas, in Route to a Communist Prison Camp”

“What the First Christmas Was Really Like (Discussion)”

II. HOW CHRISTMAS SHOULD _____ US (Phil. 2:3-7)

“Intellectuals Washing Windows”

“If I Could Only Become a Bird”

“Will You Sit With Me for Lunch?”

III. HOW THIS CHRISTMAS CAN BE _____

How I Plan to Celebrate Christmas, With the Attitude of Jesus:

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II. HOW CHRISTMAS SHOULD CHANGE US (Phil. 2:3-7)

“Intellectuals Washing Windows”

“If I Could Only Become a Bird”

“Will You Sit With Me for Lunch?”

III. HOW THIS CHRISTMAS CAN BE DIFFERENT

How I Plan to Celebrate Christmas, With the Attitude of Jesus:
