

# Christmas - a Christian's guide

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's think about times and seasons, including Christmas. A little sort of hopefully helpful guide for us.

! Mark, could you pray for us as we come to God's Word?! Particularly Christmas. I don't know. You don't have to agree with everything I say this evening.

I think Christmas is a bit confusing. I find Christmas confusing. I find it's a bit of a mixture. So we went for our Christmas treat to hear Kate Rusby, the Barnsley Nightingale, as she is known. And she said she was doing her Christmas tour and she said, For me, Christmas hasn't started until I see the Radio Times colour supplement, Christmas edition.

And that was for her, Christmas. Well, I think Christmas does have that sort of mixedness, doesn't it? There's a lot to do with commercialness.

[ 1 : 17 ] There's a lot to do with TV. And then you mix into that family. And then you can mix into that Christian faith.

And then you can mix into that history and say, Have Christians always celebrated Christmas? Have they always celebrated Christmas? Have they always celebrated the birth of Christ at the 25th of December?

And you find that some Christians in some countries don't mark the 25th. They mark other times. And you can say, Was it originally a Christian festival that pagans bought into?

Or was it originally a pagan midwinter festival that Christians bought into? And you can have all those sorts of debates and get confused about that. And then you've got on top of that the myths. I think they're myths, aren't they?

There's no really Santa Claus, is there? Oh, no, there isn't. And elves and Lapland and reindeer and all that stuff.

[ 2 : 20 ] And then I have a little suspicion that we're actually partaking in quite a bit of Victorian culture. So how many of our well-loved ancient Christmas hymns and carols are actually Victorian?

And then, of course, you've got a Christmas carol by Charles Dickens. I mean, how did they possibly have Christmas before they had a Christmas carol? And then you've got all the cooking and eating. I was beginning to take a scorecard of the number of times on the telly that it told you how to insert butter under the skin of a turkey.

And I was, you know, getting up to about five different celebrities telling us how to do this. So I find this confusing. And maybe I'm alone in this. But so if that's the case, I'm just trying to help give myself a little bit of help on this.

So I've got seven thoughts on this. And the first one is in Colossians 2, which says, to my mind at least, that new...

What, what, what? Parting and drinking. Oh, right. Well, I'm going to do the partying and drinking in a minute.

[ 3 : 35 ] But yes, there's that, that's in there as well. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Yeah. Thank you for that contribution.

So we're in Colossians 2. I've got quite a long section here. New Testament Christianity, I would say from this passage, there is something quite fundamental in saying that Christianity, New Testament Christianity is not about holy times, holy places, holy seasons, in a way that the Old Testament probably was.

So the Old Testament had holy places, most holy places. The Old Testament had specific feasts, times of the year. It did have a church calendar, if you like.

And it had a holy city. And I would like to say from the New Testament there's a radical shift that that is no longer where we're at.

But this is what this text says. So Colossians 2 from verse 6.

[ 5 : 17 ]

New Testament, I don't for one moment want to pin on Christmas the extreme position that he takes here, where he says that such and such is hollow and deceptive philosophy.

I'm not trying to pin that on Christmas. But I'm trying to say that he does say that the whole season thing, special days, is part of how things used to be.

We now have something really substantial, which is Jesus Christ. So I'd like to say that as point one, that there is something substantial about Jesus Christ, which puts, makes everything else at least take a second place.

Everything in terms of church calendar, special days, special seasons. Christ is where our focus should be. I'll give an opportunity for you to come back on that.

[ 8 : 22 ] But let me make two or three other points first. So this is these sort of random points. The second one is this. Beware the world.

So this is our Sema's point. So one of the things about Christmas, I mean these are so obvious they hardly need to be stated. The office party, the alcohol.

So there's lots of tweeting going on about the dangers of drinking and driving and trying to get people to be really sensible about alcohol. There's the allurements of romance, kissing under the mistletoe.

And then the implication that if you're a Christian and you don't do things like that, that you're really missing out on the fun of what it's all about.

And the text for that is 1 Peter 4, 1 to 11. 1 Peter 4, 1 to 11. And again, I'm not trying to pin on every office party that it's, you know, virtually an orgy, but I'm just saying there is an area here just to be aware of.

[ 9 : 33 ] So Mark, could you kindly read us 1 Peter 4, 1 to 11. So again, I just emphasize I'm not trying to pin the worst of what this text refers to onto every office party.

I am just saying that there is such a thing as the world, and it does have its pressures. And the characteristics of that are here in this passage of the style of life, which is for human pleasure, verse 2, rather than for the will of God.

And the pressure by which, in verse 4, they think it's strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. So it might not be as bad as that, might not be as intense as that, but nevertheless being mocked for not wanting to stay out at the office party as late as everybody else.

You know, you're the first person to go home, and they'll say, you know, you're a bit of a wimp or whatever. So this is as described in Scripture. Interesting to see the opposite.

So he says, don't get carried away with that. And what he presents is the alternative, which I take to be in verse 7 and onwards. And the alternative is, he says, that first way of thinking assumes that the world will go on the same way forever and ever.

[ 11 : 07 ] And that's all there is. And the second way of thinking knows that the end of all things is near, and there's a judge to whom we must give account. And then he starts talking about things like being clear-minded.

And he talks about being able to pray. And then he talks about the Christian family. Love each other deeply. Because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. So he moves from this idea of the, I suppose, the community of short-lived pleasure and all that that offers to the community of real love, of prayer.

The community that's looking forward to the coming of Christ. And then he talks about service. And he says, each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others. And speaking and serving.

It's interesting, isn't it, that there's the one picture and here's the other. From the dissipation of verse 4 to the community and the service of verses 7 to 11.

[ 12 : 19 ] So that's my second point. There is such a thing as the world. And my third point is that there is a take on Christmas. And you may disagree with me on this.

But I think there is a take on Christmas that is, it smacks more of law than grace. And it's rather disguised, but it smacks of law rather than grace.

And my text is Romans 7 verse 4, which simply says that we are not married to the law. And in its context, he means the law of Moses.

But I think if it's true of the law of Moses, it's true of any other set of laws. So Romans 7 verse 4 says, And he says, And he says, And you say, Why is he talking about Christmas being to do with law?

So you're entitled to disagree with me, but I think there are a lot of hidden thou shalt in our culture's thought about Christmas. So thou shalt cook the finest turkey, even better than Nigella Lawson, and even better, dare we say it, than Jamie Oliver himself.

[13:56] There is a thou shalt about standards of cooking. Thou shalt greet every conceivable person that thou hast ever met by sending them a Christmas card.

And that's quite a lot of money. And I think there's an aspect of law there. And you feel guilty if you haven't done it. And you feel you've failed, you know, if you haven't cooked the finest turkey. Thou shalt spend more money this year on presents than thou hast ever spent before.

I think that's particularly with children. So it isn't equally applicable to every stage of life. But I think there's an aspect of law there.

Thou shalt enjoy everything. Thou shalt enjoy having thy family round, even though thou hasn't seen them for quite a long time, and thou doesn't always get on with them. You know, there is a sort of expectation, isn't there?

And expectations that can be unrealistic, and therefore, when they're not met, you actually feel a bit of a failure.

[15:01] And the song tells us that this is the most wonderful time of the year. And I think even in saying that, there is a hint of law, because it's your job to make it the most wonderful time of the year. And if you have the family round, and you don't make it the most wonderful time of the year, then you've failed.

So you might disagree with me on this. You might think I've got a completely perverse take on this. But I'm just saying beware. And let's not let ourselves...

Let's not let ourselves... We've died to the law. We live to Christ. It's Christ's expectations that we have to meet, not Jamie Oliver's. And it's Christ's expectations we have to meet in the gifts that we give.

And, you know, the Lord isn't measuring how much we've racked up on the Barclay card this year compared with last year to give us marks out of ten on it.

You see, this is my... You might think that's a very perverse thought. Here's number four. That Christmas presents gospel opportunities.

[16:07] Well, it does. Although, of course, they're limited. So here's Ephesians 5. Ephesians 5, 15 and 16. Ephesians 5, 15 and 16.

So please could ask Semma to read that to us. Thank you. No, that's fine. Yeah. Paul tells us to make the most of every opportunity.

So if there is opportunity of Christmas, people will talk about religious things a bit. It will become... I've put...

That's a he for Christ. That's a chi, but people would make that into an X for Xmas, wouldn't they? There are gospel opportunities. We try to take them.

But I think as with anything where we're trying to do ventures for the Lord, we do what we can. And we have to be aware of the limitations.

[17:20] We have to be aware. So we're not excessively disappointed. We put in a huge effort, shall we say, of getting people to come to last Sunday. It would be wonderful if some of them came along through the new year.

Because that's really what we're aiming for, isn't it? But let's not be totally devastated if that doesn't happen. There are other gospel opportunities.

And we want to keep taking gospel opportunities. It wasn't all our eggs in one basket, as it were. But yeah, so Christmas presents gospel opportunities, although they're limited, like all things.

Here's number five. Enjoyment of good gifts is a fully Christian thing. 1 Timothy 4.

1 Timothy 4. Verses 1 to 6. So, Roger, please, could you read that? 1 Timothy 4. 1 to 6. So this is another counterpoint to things that have been said already.

[18:39] Enjoyment of good gifts is a thoroughly Christian thing. So lest you should think I'm saying, don't give presents to children.

Don't have twinkly lights in your house. Don't adorn your house with whatever vegetation you might want to. Don't enjoy singing anything.

That's the exact opposite of what Christian faith is about, isn't it? Because he says here, abstaining from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

He says, don't tell people to abstain. To be enjoyed. So do enjoy your, whatever you're having for Christmas. Whether it's Jamie Oliver or Nigella Lawson or whatever it is.

Enjoy it. Thank God for being able to sit around a table with a roof over one's head and some warmth around and a table to sit at and perhaps some people to sit with who you care about and who care about you.

[ 19 : 49 ] Life doesn't get any better than that. That's the great thing. I mean, if you had a million, a million, a million, squillion pounds, you couldn't be richer than that, could you? So these things are created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Everything God created is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. So enjoyment of good gifts is a fully Christian thing.

You know, turning up one's nose at good gifts is sub-Christian. God created these things to be enjoyed. So I'll just repeat that yet again.

Singing songs that you like, enjoy it. Decorating one's home, enjoy it. Having a time with friends and family, enjoy it with a good conscience, heartily, with thanksgiving to God because God made the world good to be enjoyed.

And whatever else you'd like to add to that list of good things, the enjoyment of them is fully Christian. And so, two more points if you will bear with me for that.

[ 21 : 05 ] Freedom under Christ is a gospel thing. You don't often think in these terms. Galatians 5 verse 1.

Galatians 5 verse 1. And then I'm going to also do Romans 14. I think it's a little bit of a conundrum about how freedom works, but it definitely is part of the gospel environment.

So, Chris, could you give us Galatians 5 verse 1, please? This is freedom. Christ is sent to you. Stand firmly.

Do not let yourself be burned again by your enslavement. Thank you. And then Romans 14. Ray, could you read verses 1 to verse 6?

If you can stop halfway through verse 6, that would be great. But it doesn't look on the internet. And there's quite a bit about... Christmas has been controversial.

[ 22 : 22 ] The Puritans thought that it wasn't a good thing for Christians to celebrate Christmas. And I didn't delve into the reasoning of it, but that's what they thought.

And they thought that to the Lord. And other people feel, well, that's... No, we can celebrate Christmas. Let's do it. And people do that to the Lord.

And Paul says, strangely enough, he says, well, accept one another. Don't make a big controversy out of this. You're each doing this to the Lord.

You know, whatever you do, whether you celebrate on the 24th or the 25th, or you don't celebrate too much at all, or whether you have a Christmas tree, or you don't have a Christmas tree, or whatever.

You're doing that to the Lord, aren't you? And who are you to judge another man's servant? There's a sort of freedom that we're to have over things like this. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

[ 23 : 25 ] And then we're to allow... I don't know whether live and let live is the way that he described it. It's something not too distant from that, isn't it? There is a freedom.

There is a freedom. And that's a gospel thing, to be in a community where people are free, perhaps to draw different conclusions, free to serve the Lord as they honestly think before the Lord is best.

I'm not talking about top-level doctrines. I'm talking about things that are of a subsidiary importance. That's how Paul is taking it.

But he says there's a freedom. Freedom in that. Let's enjoy that freedom. And my seventh point, which I have helpfully labelled six again, by mistake...

So this is my second point, number six, is that there is a theology of the Incarnation, and it's a pretty fantastic theology.

[ 24 : 31 ] As a preacher, I find it quite difficult to get to that theology via shepherds. Of course, shepherds take you in a different direction.

But there is a theology of the Incarnation, and I've got a couple of references here. Hebrews 2, from verse 14 to 18, and then 1 Corinthians 15, 21 and 22.

So this will just, as it were, start the ball rolling. So please can Maria read, briefly ponder both those texts.

The Hebrews text is making this very powerful point about the humanness of Jesus. So I guess the Hebrew Christians were finding Jesus' humanity a stumbling block, an issue.

They were saying, but we are worshipping the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and how come we've got this human Jesus? Isn't that a bit of a step down?

[ 25 : 37 ] And the synagogue is beckoning them back and saying, no, you don't want that human Jesus, he's just human. You want to really worship the living God. And the writer to the Hebrews is saying, no, no, no, no, you're going to...

That's a step backwards. The humanness of Jesus is not something to be embarrassed about. It, in a sense, it opens the key to the wonder of the preciousness of Jesus.

So in Hebrews 2, verse 14, he says that, it talks about the community of the redeemed. The children have flesh and blood.

He too shared in their humanity, so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, the devil.

He said, Jesus came and took humanity in order to redeem humanity, in order to destroy the work of the devil, to destroy him who holds the power of death.

[ 26 : 45 ] And then he says in verse 16, it is not angels he helps. There is no Christmas story for angels.

There is no place where Jesus was born an angel. That has not happened and it won't happen.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem as a baby, as a human baby.

And he says, this is the point. It is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order to become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

He said, in order to be such a brilliant and effective redeemer, he had to take human nature so that in human nature he could make this atonement.

So in human nature he could be a faithful high priest. So a high priest who really understands our condition. You might correct me if I am wrong, but my sort of amateurish understanding is that in Roman Catholicism the tendency is to make Mary the one who understands us because she is a woman and she knows what we are like.

[ 28 : 09 ] But in the Bible that robs Jesus because it is Jesus who became like us, who knows what it is like to be mocked, to be disappointed, to be disheartened, to be contradicted and to be tempted.

He is human and he knows those things. So he is totally equipped to be our priest, to be our saviour. That is the point that he is making there.

And not only in his role as an intercessor, someone who stands between, but in the sacrifice that he made, it was human sin and it was paid for in human currency.

Do you see what I mean? He, as a human being, paid the price that human beings had run up in terms of their debt.

So he says, you know, this is the understanding, the theology of the incarnation. This is why it is so brilliant that Jesus became human.

[ 29 : 20 ] Not for angels, but for us. See, there is grace there, isn't there? Saying he understands us. He understands us. And he paid what was needed, where it was needed, in the way it was needed.

So I think there is a great thing there. And then in 1 Corinthians 15, the hope for the human race, and I won't even attempt to go all the way through the thoughts of 1 Corinthians 15, but it's to do with resurrection.

And the people that he's writing to are a bit dubious about resurrection, because they're Greeks, and Greek philosophy says spirituality and material stuff are two opposites.

So if you've got a spiritual, sort of spirituality in Jesus, that can't involve resurrection, because resurrection is physical stuff.

And Paul says, no, you know, you've got that totally wrong. Because Jesus was truly human, and as true human, he was raised.

[ 30 : 37 ] And what that does is that it guarantees a knock-on effect to all those who belong in him. That as he was raised, so all who belong to him will be raised as full human beings, with a new body, and renewed in every way to be like him.

So, Paul says, death came through a man. The resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all who are in Christ will be made alive. So there's a terrific hope looking forward to the future.

So those were my seven points, and I will stop there.