

Unpacking Christmas: What to do with God's Grace

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Preacher: Rev. Chris Ley

[0 : 00] Good evening. Well, first of all, if you are here tonight, I'd like to congratulate you. And I'd like to congratulate you twofold.

I'd like to congratulate you because you have survived Christmas with all the food and all the presents and all the preparation and all the stress. And not only have you survived Christmas, you've also survived Boxing Day.

You've survived all the lines and all the weights. And you are now here, and I'm impressed. So congratulations. So if you are here, and I assume most of you are, you have done better in breathing today than 4 million turkeys in Canada.

I went on to Stats Canada's website and I did some research, and 4 million turkeys were consumed yesterday in Canada alone. I did some more research and found out 6 million Christmas trees were cut down this year.

That's 59.4 million dollars in tax receipts for Christmas trees. I looked at how much Canadians spend on decorations. 200 million dollars every year is spent importing decorations from China, India, Mexico, and Taiwan.

[1 : 17] 200 million dollars. In fact, I looked at the Internet. How many single orders are made for Christmas online?

And I found out that 69.9 million orders were placed this year alone for Christmas. 59.9.

Oh, I'm sorry. I've got my numbers wrong. That's 12.8 billion dollars on online orders for Christmas. 12.8 billion dollars.

And just to give you a measuring stick, the Olympics, we're told, cost about 4 billion dollars. So we're at 13 billion so far. And that's just online orders. So I looked at the power of Stats Canada and looked at food and presents and decorations and marketing and Santa parades.

Everything. What is the total cost for this country to celebrate Jesus' birthday every year? We, as a country, spend 51 billion dollars.

[2 : 21] That is a 5, a 1, and 9 zeros on Christmas every single year. That's two times BC's provincial budget. 51 billion dollars.

If you divide 51 billion by 34 million, which is the population of Canada, you find 1,500 dollars is what each Canadian spends on Christmas.

So even in this room, we would have spent tens of thousands of dollars, according to the averages, on Christmas. 1,500 dollars per individual in Canada on Christmas.

I found out 1,500 dollars is actually more than most people make who are living under the poverty line in this country. So what a Canadian living under the poverty line makes in a month is less than what we spend on a day in December.

What's worse, one in nine children in Canada live in poverty or under this poverty line. That's nearly 1 million children who definitely didn't have the Christmases or 1,500 dollars was spent on them.

[3 : 36] In fact, there's 10.8% of Canadians who live under this poverty line, which is 4 million people, or about double the size of Vancouver's entire population. And you know, Christmas is supposed to be this time of peace and joy and hope and goodwill towards men.

And yet, there's incredible pain during it for some people. 91,000 people in Canada alone this year celebrated Christmas for the first time with the loss of their spouse.

91,000 people. 5% of our population, 1.7 million people, are widowed men and women in Canada. 5% of our population, 1 in 20. According to statistics, yesterday, Christmas Day, 630 people will have died.

And I was driving home from my fiancé's house where we were celebrating Christmas and I drove past two ambulances and a fire truck outside a house with Christmas lights and a Christmas tree and I thought, what is going on in that house?

[4 : 50] Where such joy and such anticipation has been met with such horror and pain and suffering. This is supposed to be the season of mercy, the season of grace, the season of hope.

And indeed, the passage we just read, Romans 12, speaks about these mercies of God. That's how it starts. I urge you in view of God's mercy. And my question is, where is this mercy in a season that is so mixed with such joy alongside of such pain?

How can we truly see God's mercy in a world of such suffering? I want to tell you a story to illustrate what I mean by this joy and this pain colliding in Christmas.

There was an 18-year-old girl and this girl was visited miraculously by an angel and told she was going to become pregnant and give birth to a child. Of course, you know this girl's name was Mary and she lived about 2,000 years ago.

Now, Mary was a virgin. And I just want you to place your head in that setting. Can you imagine if in our congregation there was an 18-year-old girl who was pregnant claiming to be a virgin?

[6 : 18] No, guys, you don't understand. An angel visited me. It was a miracle. Can you imagine how we would treat them? Can you imagine the persecution and the pain and the suffering and the exclusion Mary would have felt?

The incredible joy of knowing she is holding God in her womb held with the incredible suffering of being completely outcast from her entire community would have been an incredibly difficult time for Joseph, her fiancé, to stand next to her and say, no, I believe what she's saying.

No, I stand by her. We're not told how her parents or her community or her family responded, but they're not mentioned at all in the story, which suggests they were not present. Incredible suffering in the context of such joy.

What's worse, after struggling through this humiliation for nine months, this young girl, Mary, when she was ready to conceive, was told, no, you actually have to go 150 kilometers from where you live to Bethlehem.

There's a government census there and you have to be a part of it, as decreed by Caesar. So she would have gone 93 miles or 150 kilometers, which I looked up, and it's the equivalent of if we walked out of this building right now and went to Hope.

[7 : 36] That's 150 kilometers, just to give you a context, on a donkey, when you're ready to conceive. Now, I have to confess, I've never been nine months pregnant.

But I am told from fairly reliable sources that the idea of horseback or riding on a donkey for 150 kilometers is not at all appealing.

It would not have been comfortable. It would not have been enjoyable. After this agonizing trip, when they finally got to Bethlehem, and Mary is likely sick and exhausted and unbelievably uncomfortable and scared, they try and find a place to stay.

And since everyone needs to take this census, there is not a single room, not a single room in an entire town for a girl about to give birth. What I find truly incredible about this story is there is no good Samaritan.

There is not a single person in this town who says, you're nine months pregnant and about to conceive. Take my bed. Take my room. Your need is much greater. In the story of Mary and Joseph, there is no hospital, no health care giver, no midwife, no good Samaritan, no neighbor, no relative.

[8 : 58] Nobody extends themselves and says, we will help you. They are completely alone, completely isolated, scared, about to give birth out of wedlock.

So if you are suffering this Christmas, or if you are grappling with how on earth can I be joyful when there is such incredible pain in my life, I want you to take comfort in the first Christmas story.

As Joseph continued to look for a room, it became obvious that they weren't going to find one, and Mary was about to give birth. So in desperation, he found a barn where livestock were penned up. In this filthy, rank, uncomfortable setting, Mary prepared to deliver the God of the universe. And we aren't told how long the delivery took, but we can expect it was incredibly uncomfortable, agonizing, with no medication, with no health care, with no hygiene.

An 18-year-old girl, or something around there. Jesus was born, they wrapped him in some cloth, and they put him in a feeding trough, because that's all there was.

[10 : 19] And I just, can you imagine, the God of the universe, at whose voice, mountains melt, who speaks, and nations completely crumble, who indeed spoke, and the world was created, who has counted the hairs on your head, and who has knit you together in your mother's womb, and knows every minute you will be alive, and right now, right now, is counting your breaths, and is dictating, that you should breathe, that your heart should beat.

this God, who is completely powerful, and unfathomable, and amazing, was born in a barn, covered in filth, to an 18-year-old virgin.

And that scene, must have been, one of the oddest scenes in the world, for those shepherds to walk into. They've been told, they're about to see God, and they've seen, you know, kind of a, the pre-party, and there are angels everywhere, and they get to this place, and they just see, a kid in a feeding trough, two exhausted parents, animals going crazy, and they worship him.

A few weeks later, of course, three eastern noblemen, or the wise men, come, and they bring him, these amazing gifts. Mary's still living in this barn, so presumably, she's still recovering, from the birth, and these wise men, worship him.

But the worship is short-lived. You see, the king of the area, Herod, is so intimidated, by the birth of this Jesus, and the fact that, apparently, he's supposed to be a king, that he decides, I will kill every child, who's a male, in Bethlehem, to prevent any kings, from usurping me.

[12 : 14] And so Mary and Joseph, penniless, without a job, without a home, without a friend, without anything, are now forced to flee the country, as refugees, as exiles, knowing that, someone is trying, to kill their new child.

It's just the most, incredible story, of joy, and pain. Of course, the story doesn't end there. Mary not only, saw Jesus born humbly, but she saw him, humiliated, tortured, and murdered, about 30 years later.

And I just, I can't imagine, Mary was visited, and told these incredible promises, about how she was going, to give birth to God. And as she saw him, dying on this cross, her son, but also her Lord, I'm sure she saw, the promises of God, dying to.

And she thought, I have no hope. This promise, is gone. Jesus hung there, and people were making fun of him, and he said, Lord, forgive them, for they don't know, what they're doing.

He asked one of his disciples, to look after his mother, who was crying, at his feet. He saw people, gambling for his clothes. And as the agony, and the pressure of his body, for each breath, got harder and harder, and as Jesus' lungs collapsed, and as he suffocated, he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[13 : 56] Of course, we know that isn't the end of the story. That isn't all that Mary saw.

Mary came back three days later, to mourn for her son, and she saw, the tomb was open, that he'd been risen, that Christ had come, and had fulfilled that promise. That it wasn't, just that he'd been killed, but he actually had to be killed, in order for sins to be forgiven, and she saw, in him now, he had defeated death, he had defeated the enemy, and all of us can have a relationship, with God forever, because of what Jesus has done.

Evil was overcome, death died, and life was now offered, to everyone, through Jesus Christ. Christ, Mary saw, complete, and total, mercy. So that was the first Christmas, and then, the first Easter.

And whether you're a visitor here, and have never stepped foot in a church, and don't believe a word, of what I've just said, or whether, you have been a Christian, for so long, you can't even remember, and you have come every Sunday, since before you know, there is a simple question, how do you respond, to this mercy?

[15 : 20] How do you respond, to this story? That God came, that he came as a baby, that God died as a criminal, that he rose again, as Lord of everything, and that he will save you, if you will but believe in him.

How do we respond, to Christmas? How do we respond, to this unbelievable grace, that God has shown us? What on earth, am I supposed to do, with this story, of God coming to earth, to save humanity?

As all of you know, we have been, slowly working our way, through a book, by a man named Paul, and Paul became a Christian, just after Jesus, left earth, and he started writing letters, to all these churches, and perhaps, the most famous book, ever written, was a letter he wrote, to the church, in Rome, and as we know, very well, if you have been coming, to this church, it is very thick, in Paul

describing, the riches, of God's love for us, of explaining, the unexplainable, of knowing the unknowable, how loving, God is towards us, and Paul gets to chapter 12, of his book, and I think it is my favorite chapter, in the Bible, although if you are a preacher, you should be careful, about saying that, because it means every sermon, after this one, is going to be less good, but I love this chapter, and it is Paul's great response, what do we do, with the story of Christmas, what do I do, with God's mercy, shown to me, is Christmas, more than tinsel, and presents, is there something, in this, that demands, a response from me, and these are the words,

Paul writes, Romans 12, verse 1, I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, and sisters, in view, of God's mercy, to present, your bodies, as a living sacrifice, holy, holy, and acceptable, to God, this, is your true, spiritual, worship, how do we respond, to Christmas, what do we do, now that it's over, how do I respond, to God's grace, shown to me, I urge you, in view, of God's mercy, to offer your body, as a living sacrifice, in response to Christ, giving his life, for us, in gratitude, for the horrors, of the first Christmas, and Jesus' death, because God, became human, and was born, and lived, and was murdered, and was raised again, because of that, and in gratitude, for that, not under obligation, we now give, our lives to him, and that's the only response, it's the only adequate response, when you read this story, and you hear, what God has done for you, is to lay yourself, at his feet, and say, I am yours forever, use me, use me to glorify you, what does it look like, to live your life, for Jesus, what does it mean, to be a living sacrifice, as Beth read, Romans 12 goes on, to spell it out for us, what Paul means, by presenting ourselves, as living sacrifices, and what I find, truly incredible about it, is the way, God wants to be glorified, is by us, loving other people, it's kind of like, when a child, comes to their parents, at Christmas, and says, mom, dad, for Christmas, I want you to give gifts, to other children, and by giving gifts, to others, you are loving me, it's kind of what, God's doing here, God is saying, how I am glorified, is when you, love the world, in my name, that is how you glorify me, that is what I want, I don't want, legal obligations, or religious ceremonies, or special clothes, or anything like that,

[19:39] I want you to love, this world, to love one another, and if you do that, in my name, you are glorifying me, and that's what, Romans 12 at its core, is really all about, I want you to go home, and read Romans 12, 9 to 18 again, it is so applicable, it's incredible, and I want you, to challenge yourself, in what it looks like, for you, to live a life, as a living disciple, and what most of all, Romans 12 talks about, is it says, when we live like this, when you live as a living, or sacrifice, if you see God's mercy, and you say, that's incredible, that God has died for me, that God has forgiven me, that I can know him forever, and if you give your life, to him in response, if you live a life, as a living sacrifice, we're told, in verse 21, that evil is defeated, if you live like this,

Satan will flee from you, verse 21, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil, with good, God is most glorified, when you, in gratitude, give your life, to loving him, by serving other people, in view of God's mercy, present your bodies, as a living sacrifice, what does this look like, there are one million children, in Canada, who live in poverty, one million children, what would it look like, for you, to love one of these children, maybe you pay for their parents, to go out to a date, and you babysit the kids, and you watch their favorite movie, maybe you bring them over, to your house, so they can experience dinner, with your family, and be guests, maybe you bring them gifts, if that's what they need, maybe you just call the parents, and say, what do you need right now, what do your kids need, do they need a fun day, do they need to be taken somewhere, how can I love your children, any one of us can do that, looking beyond Canada, there are 15 million children, in this world, who will die in the next year, because of hunger, completely preventable, completely healthy children, just simply dying, because they don't have enough food, in view of God's mercy, will you give your life, as a living sacrifice, and ensure that some of these kids, don't starve, will you give some of your time, or your money, or your prayer, or your encouragement, or your support, to an organization, that will feed these children, there are 1.7 million, widows and widowers in Canada, 91,000 new ones, every year, what would it look like, in view of God's mercy, you would give your life, to meeting with a widow, once a week, and praying with them, calling a widow, once a week, and seeing how they're doing, inviting someone, who's lonely, over your house, to experience your family, going out for coffee, once every two weeks, sending them emails, if they have an email, if they don't give them a phone call, what would it look like, if we gave our lives, as living sacrifices, to love this world, that suffers,

I think it's a picture of heaven, I've been blessed, at this congregation, to be involved, with some ministries, where it is youth, serving elders, and all we're doing, I don't even know, if you can call it

service, is we're just visiting with them, and those of us, who have done it, have known, what an amazing blessing, it's been, for us as youth, and for them, as seniors, and I think, it's a picture of heaven, it's a picture that, in view of God's mercy, I will give my life, as a living sacrifice, to love God's people, to love God's world, and by doing that, I'm glorifying him, I want you to read, this chapter, and I want you to, challenge yourself, and be creative, with what it looks like, in your life, to lay it at Christ's feet, and to be used, as a living sacrifice, it is Christmas, God has come to us, and God invites us, to respond,

God has died for us, and in gratitude, he offers us, to give our lives, for him, how do you, respond, to Christmas, Amen, we're going, to go into, a time of prayer now, so I'd invite you, to sit or kneel, there'll be a couple times, throughout the prayer, where I will say, Lord in your mercy, and if you could respond, with hear our prayer, that'd be great, living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, your unmatched glory, fills us with awe, and it brings us, to our knees, before your throne, dear Lord, we thank you, and praise you, for delighting, in our prayers, which are like, sweet incense to you, as we come, before you in prayer, we thank you, for loving us, and listening to us,

Lord in your mercy, Lord we thank you, we thank you for Jesus, your word become flesh, God incarnate, Emmanuel, God with us, Lord Jesus, we thank you, for humbling yourself, we thank you, for coming to earth, and being born, and being born, to the lowliest of stations, we thank you, for dying, a criminal's death, for us, we thank you, for atoning, for our sins, through this, and we thank you, that you, through this, adopt us, as your sons, and daughters, Lord in your mercy, dear, dear father, we lift up, your world to you, we lift up, the sick, and the depressed, and the oppressed, and the hungry, and the lonely, the homeless, Holy Spirit, provide for their needs, help them, to know your power, and peace, but also, help us, to see, what we can do, fill us, with a love, for others, that only comes, from you Lord, and help us, to see, that we can worship you, through serving others, [26 : 57] Lord in your mercy, Jesus, we lift up your church, help us, to help us father, by your word, and your spirit, to be drawn, even deeper, into relationship, with you, help us, to know you better, and become, even better, your image bearers, Lord help us, to do this, in our families, and workplaces, and schools, help us, to make your name famous, and help us, to do everything, for your glory, rather than our own, Lord in your mercy, now if you'll join me, we'll pray the prayer, that Jesus taught us, our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven, give us today, our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those, who sin against us, lead us not, into temptation, but deliver us, from evil, for yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, amen.

As we go into, our offering hymn, just a reminder, that you, there, there, people are, you have not seen it, it's very, it's very important, because, there, there's no rhythm, they're not chegou to know, but, in such a good way.

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