

Overflowing Grace

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Thanks so much for making it a point to be here on this great occasion of the celebration of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ's birth.

Some of you may have been out last night as well, and it's great that you made this a priority this morning as well. Let me begin with these two sentences by C.S. Lewis.

Some like to refer to him as St. Louis, and others affectionately called him Jack, but we'll keep with C.S. Lewis.

He said, the central miracle asserted by Christians is the incarnation. Christians say that God became man. Well, some of us might beg to differ with C.S. Lewis on the centrality of the incarnation.

I hope that's not a bit of a shock to you. There's also the crucifixion, the resurrection, and Christ's ascension. Few of us would dare to disagree with him on the miracle of the incarnation.

[1 : 03] The incarnation revealed in the birth or coming of Christ Jesus is the miracle that captures the imagination, and it brings us here this Christmas morning. I wonder about the message and meaning of Christmas as well as the miracle of it.

Does the message capture you the same way as the miracle in it all? Does the meaning compel you the same way as the mystery of it all? When Nathan read the second lesson, did you think to yourself, what are we doing reading that lesson this morning?

When you listened to it closely, did you want to say, I'm sorry, but I think there are a few other lessons more fitting for this occasion? Maybe you found yourself remembering a certain verse in the reading from another context as it was read.

And I hope you recognize this verse from verse 15. It is in your bulletin as well, I think on page three. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

If you didn't recognize it, I'm confident by the end you'll remember it from now on. It is this verse that I want to focus on this Christmas morning. It is not only the greatest synthesis of the Christmas message, it is also the greatest synthesis of the Christian message.

[2 : 23] It is the gospel for this occasion today, and it is the gospel for all of life. In doing so, I want to look at two things, just what happened and why it happened.

First then, what happened? We learned someone came into the world. Who came into the world? Paul tells us Christ Jesus is the one.

Just about everyone celebrating Christmas this year in Vancouver knows that, given a little bit of grace. Some might say Jesus, others might say Christ. Few might put the two together and say Christ Jesus.

You may give that answer when asked the question, or maybe even not. Why? Who? Christ Jesus. What is the meaning of these two words? We're so familiar with the two words, Christ Jesus, that we fail to appreciate the impact in connecting this title with this name.

I imagine it was right, or seemed right, for the first disciples to connect Christ with Jesus. But they found putting the two together quite maybe awkward at first. A little like maybe a woman who takes on her husband's surname.

[3 : 36] The Jews longed to make this claim and put a name to Christ for centuries. Christ they knew about in theory and in covenant. But to put a name to the title Christ, they had no idea.

Even the name Yahweh, which was the name for God, they couldn't mention or speak. And finally they could call out and state Christ, Jesus. Jesus, the name that went and goes with Christ.

Jesus, the only name that filled in the blank after the title Christ. And so Christ, what does Christ mean? Christ means fully and truly God.

Christ is God's chosen, Lord, anointed, Messiah. Christ is the one who could do as God what we cannot do for ourselves. This is the meaning of Christ.

And this was big for the Jews and it's big for us. Yet the world and we, if we're honest, imagine Christ wrong. Like Peter, who confessed on the one hand and denied Christ on the other.

[4 : 41] Yes, we in the world, if we're honest, imagine Christ too small. Like J.B. Phillips in his classic book, your God is too small. And so our Christ is too many things.

My Christ, I know, is too distant and stingy and ambiguous. Too normal, absent and silent. Too impotent, incompetent, irrelevant.

But you know, that's not the blank that the Father filled in after the title, when Christ came into the world. The Father filled in the blank after Christ with Jesus.

So it's important that while letting the name of Jesus fall from our lips, we use, mention, call, cry out to God in this name. And do so reverently, cautiously, giving worth-ship to Jesus Christ.

Look in our text today, what Paul does at the beginning and the end. Look in your bulletin. This is what Paul says. Beginning in thanksgiving and ending in praise of this Christ Jesus.

[5 : 48] Not only Christ and not only Jesus, but Christ Jesus for Paul evokes gratitude and glory. And so he says in verse 12, I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Verse 17, To the King of kings, King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.

Amen. Gratitude and glory. Christ and Jesus deserves treatment and response like nobody else. Jesus deserves us because he is like no one else, fully and truly human.

Jesus is the one who shows us exactly what it actually means to be human like nobody else. And we think that human means a number of things, don't we?

Maybe failings and imperfections and immorality and shortcomings. But that's the human condition of our sinful nature. So, so many people will say or think, what do you expect?

[6 : 54] He or she is only human. Right? Saying that that's the thing to be expected. But Jesus, who is fully and truly human, is like none of us.

Perfect. Never sinning. Jesus, who's emotionally alive. He's relationally connected. He's spiritually integrated. He's mentally complete.

He's morally spotless. Though limited physically, Jesus, when he came, could not be everywhere. But if you want to see what it fully and truly human looks like, look no further and nowhere else than the man named Jesus.

That's the one who is the who of the Christmas message, Christ Jesus. The what of the Christmas message is that he came into the world.

And what does that mean? Of course, we know about the miraculous conception and the natural birth. There are two messages of Christ Jesus coming or entering or arriving into the world. And the first one is negative.

[8 : 00] Christ Jesus came into the world, not by our invitation. The world didn't think, God, why don't you send us Christ Jesus? Let us just sit down and script for you an invitation to enter our world.

How about we come up with a plan and issue a nice summons to come into the universe? We can come by our invitation. The rulers of the world, as if they put their minds together and extended an opportunity for Operation Rescue, Operation Salvation.

Would you come and do that for us, God? Now, even Psalm 2 says this about the rulers of the world, making it clear that it wasn't by our invitation that Christ Jesus came into the world.

The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed. The coming of Christ Jesus was not at the world's invitation.

So negatively, Christ Jesus didn't come at our beckoning either. But the second, though, is positive. God has always been involved in the world.

[9 : 05] And so Christ Jesus came into the world by divine initiative. All along, God's initiative is expressed in his purpose and his intentions and his initiative.

He always initiates his work and ways in our lives. He impresses upon us that in the prophet Isaiah, who expressed this, Your ways are not my ways, says the Lord.

Your thoughts are not my thoughts, says the same Lord. So Christ Jesus came completely at the initiative of God. And this is impressed upon us at every turn of Christ Jesus' life.

Don't you think? From the questions that he raised in the temple when he was only 12 years old, and people were amazed at his wisdom. The reading of Isaiah from the first day that his ministry was launched in Nazareth.

To the standing in front of Pilate in his sentencing. When he declares to Pilate, You would have no power if my father had not given it to you. Everything is done at the initiative of God, right from the beginning when he sends him.

[10:12] And this is the message of Christ Jesus. He came into the world at God's initiative and intention, and it was no accident. Furthermore, Christ Jesus isn't driven to the world against his interests, but he desired to come into the world.

Let that just settle in for a minute. Christ really wanted to come to this world. He wasn't some kind of divine stoic, a kind of a grin and bear it kind of Christ.

The moment the Trinity waited for so long, now was upon the world. In the perfect time, in the perfect place, Christ Jesus came into the world.

Now the Jews may have thought, well, isn't it a little bit late? Or maybe better late than never. They would have liked him to come a little bit earlier, just as we might like him to actually return again. Come Lord Jesus soon, right? The Gentiles, like Herod, thought, well, not now or over my dead body. Not at the time that he was born, but at some point Christ Jesus would have said, well, actually it will be over my dead body, but just a little bit later.

[11:17] And the message of Christmas is, Christ Jesus is still coming at his own initiative, interests and intentions by his Holy Spirit. He still initiates in our life.

He still intends in our life. He knocks and we can open. He waits and so we can seek. And he answers all along if we'd only ask.

And so I ask, are you knocking this Christmas? What are you seeking this Christmas? Who are you asking this Christmas? Well, the world of Vancouver, Canada, and North America likes the Christmas message so far, right?

That Christ Jesus came into the world. It would be nice just to stop right there, wouldn't it? The first half is great. The second half doesn't get the same response. Why did Christ Jesus come into the world?

Well, he came into the world to save sinners. Christmas is the sinner's celebration, not the sinner's celebration.

[12:24] Well, it is the sinner's. And it's yours. And it's mine. And it's all of our celebration because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Paul writes to Timothy for this express reason.

And he's really interested in sin because he's ultimately interested in something else, which isn't in this passage today, but throughout the letter. And that is godliness. And that is becoming like God. It means bearing the image of God. And so Paul knows, and Timothy too, that they lack this godliness apart from Christ Jesus. And this is really big for Paul and Timothy and church leaders and all disciples, followers of Jesus.

This is what Paul says about, in the letter, with respect to sinners, but becoming godly. He says, train yourself in godliness. Godliness is of value in every way. And there is great gain in godliness with contentment.

And then finally, aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness. And so why do Christians, why do people lack this godliness?

[13:32] And we lack it because of sin. So at Christmas, we need to be reminded of that, amidst all the other activities and specifics of it. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

And Paul spells out his own sin. At the beginning and end of these six verses, as I said, we have thanksgiving and praise. But closer to the message, the meat, right in the middle of it, is this.

It's about God's mercy. Friends, no mercy actually means no meaning at Christmas. Paul writes about it in this way, in verse 13, though formerly I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent, but I received mercy.

Because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. Verse 16, he says, but I receive mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost of sinners.

Friends, we're no different than Paul. Do we need the mercy of God any less than he did? The message and meaning of Christmas is Christ Jesus, who came not to condemn, but with compassion to give mercy and grace to us sinners.

[14 : 48] He's not stingy with his mercy to save us. In fact, he overflows with it. Hence the title of this, Overflowing Grace and Mercy.

Paul says, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ overflowed to me. Lord's grace and mercy overflows to us Christians as well, at this time, especially during Christmas.

The overflowing grace is what makes us then godly. That's the greatest gift. And the message of Christmas is that while God accepts us as we are, he's really gracious in that he loves us even more not to leave us as we are.

His grace overflows, giving us what we don't deserve, and that grace overflows freely. Let me just share two things briefly in closing with you then.

With respect to that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I want to give you three images. This Christmas. Maybe three gifts. And you can choose between these three. The three are a flint, a sponge, and a honeycomb.

[15 : 55] Do you want to take your pick now or do you want to hear about them after? Go ahead. Take your pick. Name it. Which one do you want? To get anything out of a flint, you must hammer it.

And then you get only chips and sparks. To get water out of a sponge, you must squeeze it. And the more you use pressure, well, the more you'll get, but it still will become empty and you'll have to put it in a bucket again.

But the honeycomb just overflows with its own sweetness. You don't have to hammer or squeeze it. And the mercy and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't need to be hammered and squeezed either.

It just overflows. And that's the great gift at this time of Christmas. The overflowing grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ who came into this world to save sinners.

And Paul tells us this in that phrase right before it. And as Christ came into the world to save sinners, Paul says, this saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance.

[17 : 04] Do you trust? Will you accept? Maybe for the first time or yet again. Please pray with me. Could Christians all rejoice with heart and soul and voice?

Now you need no fear of the grave. Jesus Christ was born to save. Come at this most gracious call and find salvation one and all.

Christ was born to save. Christ was born to save. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.