

The Meaning of Christmas

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning everyone, my name is Steve, Sandy Parsey here. Welcome to St Paul's this morning. It's great if you have your Bibles over there at one Timothy. We've got some spare ones floating around if you want one.

And you can take them home with you if you don't have one at home. And it's particularly mindful of the message you're coming through today. We're coming to the end of the year.

Christmas is over. And New Year is on upon us. Let me pray as we launch into this text verse this morning. Gracious God, we thank you for your love for us in the Lord Jesus.

We thank you for all we have just remembered and celebrated and coming into this world to save sinners just like us. We ask that as we launch into a new year, that you would affect genuine and radical change deep in our hearts and particularly our eternal status in him.

And we ask it for your glory. Amen. Andy Parke is an electrician in the UK. He also goes by the name Mr Christmas.

[1 : 0 6] It's a name that he's given himself. He claims to have celebrated Christmas Day every single day of the year since July 1993.

He claims that every day he eats turkey sandwich and mince pies for breakfast. He then goes to work and then returns home for a full roast turkey dinner before watching in the evening the recording of the Queen's Christmas speech with a sherry in the UK.

In an interview that was published in 2006, Mr Parke said that over the previous 13 years, he has consumed 4,380 turkeys, 87,600 mince pies, 1,200 litres of gravy, 26,280,000 litres of gravy, 26,280 roast potatoes, 30,660 stuffing balls, 4,380 bottles of champagne, 4,380 bottles of sherry, and 5,000 bottles of wine.

Now, it all strikes me as a little bit odd. Although, his premise has a point, even if I think he's entirely missed the point.

That is, his premise behind it all, in declaring himself being Mr Christmas, is that he thinks that Christmas is so wonderful, why would you just leave it to one day a year?

[2 : 4 8] It's something that needs to be celebrated every single day. And I would say he's right, even if he's got it entirely wrong.

But how? How do we celebrate Christmas every day? Well, if you open up that passage of 1 Timothy, you'll see there the Christmas event is right there in verse 15.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world. That's the Christmas event right there. Christ Jesus came into the world.

Christ Jesus came into the world. And the coming of the eternal Son of God into the world, Christ Jesus, is a fact of history.

There is not a credible historian anywhere in the world that would deny that. It's a fact of history. And that's what we remember we celebrate every Christmas.

[3 : 50] But the coming of the Son of God into the world is so much more than just an historical fact. The historical event that we celebrate in Christmas year in, year out, is fundamentally a message of hope.

When you continue to read the rest of verse 15, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The meaning of Christmas for you and me from Jesus Christ is that forgiveness and salvation and therefore hope is there and for our taking every single day.

Since the Son of God lived, died, rose, reigns, and is coming again, God's message through him to us is more than just remembering an historical event.

The real meaning of Christmas is about lives and destinies being changed by God forever. So what we are talking about here is not just a celebration of a historical fact and retelling of old stories.

There may be some questions over the sanity and the authenticity of Andy Park's daily celebration of Christmas, but there is no mistake about the impact of Jesus coming into this world and that impact being on a daily basis in the lives of people across this globe.

[5 : 40] The sentences in front of us today are the words of the Apostle Paul. He was one of the leaders of the Christian church in the first century and he's often, even to this day, he is often features in the list of top 20 most influential people of all time.

that's who's writing these words. And they are the sentences, are the testimony of the change that Jesus Christ brought about in his life.

Have a look there in verses 12 to 14 if you've got in front of you. I thank Christ Jesus, our Lord, who has given me strength and he considered me faithful, appointed me to his service.

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. So this is one of the top 20 most influential people of all time and he describes himself here as a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man before God graciously intervened in his life in Jesus Christ.

[7 : 08] This is Paul who used to hunt down Christians in an attempt to devastate the early Christian church. Paul's biographer, a guy named Luke, Dr. Luke, described him as a religious predator who breathed out murderous threats against Christians.

This is the Paul who was a callous, pious, self-righteous, bigoted murderer held bent on the full-scale extermination of the early Christian church.

He was one of the main enemies of Jesus Christ and the early church. And he lived day by day with God at his back.

And yet, that reality to him in that moment was a surprise for him. He says here he acted in ignorance and unbelief. That is, he was totally oblivious that his day-by-day existence was standing opposed to God, his creator.

He was under the assumption that he and God were okay. He had religious pedigree. He had piety that set him apart from all of his peers.

[8 : 27] He was zealous to do what was right and obey God's law. When he persecuted Jesus and the followers of Jesus, he thought he was actually doing God a favour.

He was ignorant of the fact that when he stood opposed to Jesus, he stood opposed to the God that he said that he worshipped. all of his religious zeal in fact made him an enemy of God.

It's noticeable that he twice says in these verses, verses 15 and 16, he refers to himself as the worst of sinners.

In other bits of the New Testament, he refers to himself as the chief of all sinners. a whole lot of people struggle with that kind of declaration. He actually says it multiple times.

Of all the people that he knows, of all the people in the world, I am the worst. One commentator in fact on this text, unhappy with Paul's self-assessment here, says that Paul is either morbid or he's being unreal.

[9 : 48] He's not telling the truth. We might say Paul is using pious exaggeration. This can be a tendency in religious circles and even in Christian circles.

You can call it spiritual hype, you can call it spiritual hyperbole, but it's actually spiritual posturing. It's spiritual pride.

How many Bible verses I can memorise and how pious I've been. But it's not that for Paul. That's not what he's talking about here. Paul is here articulating a well-considered position.

This is not a bit of spiritual false humility to make him look righteous. selfishness. But it's also not Paul being morbid. Paul is not a person with any sense of low self-image.

You can read the rest of the New Testament. That is, of course, the common view in our society for Christianity. It's a crutch for those with low self-esteem and a guilty conscience.

[11 : 00] the argument is that Paul and Paul's type are such perfectionists who are, they just get bent all out of shape, turned upside down over the smallest mistakes, over the tiniest failures.

They just go to jelly. And so for those who think Paul's being morbid here in saying that he's the worst of sinners, they'd say, oh, come on, Paul, stop being so morbid.

Goodness me. Lighten up, Paul. You know, 50% is a pass mark. See, he's got degrees. You know, come on, stop being a perfectionist. You just need a therapist, Paul.

That's what you need. Lighten up. So why is he saying here that he is the worst? What's in verse 13?

Where he describes himself as a violent man. In the original language of the New Testament, the word translated violent there in our English Bibles is the same root word where we get the English word hubris from.

[12 : 24] Verse 13 means, in reality, in the form of verse 13, it means that I am a trampler of people. That's what it literally means.

I'm a trampler of people. So Paul's saying here, I'm not being morbid. Yeah, it's true.

I did a whole heap of good stuff. But the motive that was under all of my actions was driven by pride and a desire to be superior than everyone else.

As I pursued things to please God, I trampled all over everyone. everyone. In other words, what he's saying there in that verse, everything I did was about me.

It was all about me. At the heart of every one of his actions was a need for him to be the absolute ruler and controller of his world and he would wreak destruction on anyone and everyone that stood in his way.

[13 : 49] What the New Testament tells us, what the Bible tells us is that's the very essence of what it means to be a sinner. And Paul recognises that he is the worst of sinners, purely because he is a sinner.

In that sense, we are all violent people and acting in ignorance in our violence. At the deepest level, we want to make sure that no one, including God himself, tells us how to run our lives.

That's the very essence of sin. Sin differs in its objects for each of us. It will look different for each of us, but it won't differ in its nature.

Imagine two eucalypt seeds. One falls onto the ground where there is no soil and there is no moisture. The other seed falls into a place of really rich soil and lots of rain.

The first one rots, the other one grows into a great tree, which eucalypt seed had more vitality and strength.

[15 : 12] Neither. There's no difference in the seed. It had everything to do with the environment. the Bible says that most of us do not grow up to be Ivan the Terrible or Adolf Hitler, God.

But it isn't for a lack of talent. It's not because of lack of talent. Underneath the religious self-righteousness sorry, underneath the religious self-righteous to the hardened criminal is a violent pride that elevates the self over everyone else.

Some use religion and morality. Others use irreligion and immorality to achieve the exact same end.

And Paul is saying that his heart is no different in its principle and power than the very worst of sinners. That's what he's saying here.

Don't look at my actions per se, look at my heart and my heart is in its principle and its power exactly the same as the worst of sinners.

[16 : 29] And it's only by the grace of God that he is who he is. That is the message of Christmas right there. That Jesus Christ came into the world to save Paul and you and me from the deepest recesses of our hearts.

That's the hope of Christmas. See it halfway down in verse 13. I was shown mercy. Verse 14. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly.

See what he's saying here is the hope of Christmas, the message of Christmas is that it's the grace and the mercy of God that has transformed him. God's undeserved favour to him has transformed him.

God did not give Paul what he deserved or what he had coming to him. That would have been rejection and death. Instead he was shown mercy.

That is Paul's first hand account of the impact of Jesus coming into the world to save sinners. So why is Paul here in this moment telling us about his experience of God's radical change in his life through Jesus Christ?

[17 : 45] Why is he doing that? Verse 16. For that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me the worst of sinners Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

What Paul's saying there is Jesus Christ changed me, Paul, the chief enemy of the church in its infant days and Paul tells us about that change so that in here on the last day of 2023 you and I could grasp the meaning of Christmas on the other side of the world two centuries later.

The word example there in verse 16 means that Paul is not just a pattern but that he is the ultimate pattern. He is the ultimate type of what a Christian is.

Jesus Christ picked the chief of sinners to demonstrate to you and to me today in 2023 what his mercy and his power can do in your life now.

That's what he's saying in verse 16. There is no sinner that the grace of God in Jesus cannot overflow to and deal with. And so when you're sitting here and you've lived a long life and particularly when you're cynical, do not belittle the mercy of God at the end of this year saying well I am who I am and I just can't change.

[19 : 24] That is nonsense. What happened to Paul can happen to you. Notice it there in verse 15. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst. To save sinners. Paul's personal reason to give thanks to God is now widened to the praise of the universal significance of Christmas.

Jesus came into the world for the world. For you. Not just Paul. Purpose of Jesus coming into the world to save sinners has been welcomed by 2,000 years of human beings from every culture and tribe who conscious of their guilt before God have gratefully accepted what the saving death of Jesus Christ has accomplished for them in bringing them back into relationship with God.

Christmas declares your marriage is going to work so put it here in the confused children, cynical teenagers, the poor, the outcast, the guilt-ridden, the tired parents, the financially stressed, the aged, the lonely, the preachers, for lovers, for haters, for you and for me.

Paul, in these verses, calls across the centuries to celebrate Christmas in 2023. Don't despair. He saved me, the worst of sinners. He can save you too and he can change you too.

[21 : 35] There's one more thing. Because Jesus came into this world to save sinners, what is most precious to us doesn't need to ever be lost. This is the greatest hope of Christmas.

Verse 16 again. I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

The deepest hope of Christmas is eternal life. And life is good. Life is precious. And we don't want to ever lose it.

We can talk all we like about all the good things of life. But if you don't have life, you don't have anything. And the promise of Christmas is that you need never lose the most precious thing in your life.

Your life. Your life is precious and can be saved. Jesus Christ came into the world to save us and to change us forever.

[22 : 42] He came into this world to change our eternal status. And so that's got to be one of the biggest motives for allowing him to change us right now.

Right now, each day. And I think that's how we celebrate Christmas. By holding on to the good news of the mercy and the grace of God. And allowing that news to change us day in and day out.

That's how you celebrate Christmas. Every day of the year. And I happen to think that it's a really happy connection. That every year, one week after celebration of Christmas and the great salvation event, we enter into the new year.

We move from the celebration of God's salvation for all of humanity in Jesus Christ to the dawning of a new age, a new era, a new year.

The promise of a reset. Resolutions of change. And these verses are declaring that real change is possible. The meaning of Christmas.

[23 : 48] God's mercy to sinners through Jesus Christ should be pushed down into our hearts day by day and it should rise again in change day by day in our lives.

What God did on that very first Christmas and what he did in changing Paul's life forever and what he does in forgiving and changing people across the globe nowadays is utterly free mercy.

So let me just first of all say if you're not a Christian and you're here today, you're tuning in online, mark this year, mark this year by coming to Jesus today.

recognise that through the actions of your life, even though they may not warrant you being declared the worst of people, but the actual motive of your heart, if you allow yourself a moment of silence to dig deep enough, the motive of your heart declares that you do need saving.

You do need rescuing. And the good news of Christianity is that though we are worse than we could possibly even imagine, in Jesus Christ, we are more loved and affirmed than you could ever possibly dream.

[25 : 17] That's the wonder of Christmas. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. That is God's gift to the world. It's his gift to you this Christmas and it's worthy of full acceptance today.

If you are a Christian, how has God changed you this year? Because that is the reason he has saved you. How has he changed you?

Can you actually mark how he's changed you? Can you actually mark how he's changed you? Paul is the ultimate example of a life changed.

In this past year at St. Paul's, we have constantly been asking you, what is your next step? Another way you might want to put that, what is your next step of change and transforming to become more like Jesus as you cling to the grace and his mercy to you?

We began this year looking at the example of others who have been changed by God's mercy and have run the race of faith, focused on Jesus alone. And then we spent a whole term looking at Jesus and the good news of Christianity and why that news today is still plausible, why it is still relevant and why it is so immensely good.

[26 : 43] From there we got glimpses of God's glory and majesty in term two as we jumped into the book of Isaiah. In term three we again soaked in God's generosity and his grace and his mercy to us and the way that it transforms our life in every sphere of life as we walk through the latter sections of Luke's gospel.

And then we just finished out just before Christmas discovering again the abundant life on offer in Jesus in John's gospel. The constant theme throughout this entire year has been the goodness, the plausibility and the relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news and the change it must bring into your life now.

Right through the year we have used virtually every Sunday the word what is or the statement what is your next step? How has God changed you in 2023?

Jesus Christ came into the world to save you and to change you forever. How has that been evident? And if you say that you're Christian and that is not evident, how might you be taking your next step in celebrating the meaning of Christianness tomorrow and every day of 2024?

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.