

“God Bless Us Everyone”

I John 4:7-12

Series: A Christmas Carol Week 2. Finding Love Among the Wrappings

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The Woodside Church

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‘Twas the night before Christmas and in Scrooge’s house
Jacob Marley was stirring to warn the old louse.
He stood in the room between chimney and chair
In the hopes Ebenezer, on Christmas, would care

“You must change your ways or these chains you will clatter
You need to see Christmas as a whole different matter.”
Then suddenly it occurred to Scrooge in a flash.
“Christmas is not humbug. It’s a way to make cash!”

I won’t curse Christmas as I hide in my bed
I won’t cry, ‘Bah Humbug.’ I’ll sell it instead.
Jumping up from his chair in this whole new mind frame
He whistled and shouted and called them by name:

Now Walmart! Now Target! Now, Forever 21!
On Macy’s! On Gap! And of course Amazon!
From the start of Black Friday to the heart of the mall
Now, charge away! Charge away! Charge away all!

Marley shouted at Scrooge, “That’s not what I meant.
To care for the poor should be our intent.”
The purpose of Christmas is not just to please us
But to love the whole world like our dear Lord Jesus.”

Scrooge shot back at Marley, “Away with your Prophet
If they share with the needy it’ll cut down my profits.”
I’ll wipe Christ from Christmas, I’ll ban all the mangers
On his birthday I’ll make Jesus feel like a stranger.

And if piles of presents ‘neath the tree are not huge
They’ll look at each other and say, “You’re a Scrooge.”
The ones who have everything will have even more
While they do very little for the hungry and poor

As Marley floated away, his head he did shake,
“God bless us and keep us from this Christmistake.”

Perhaps the greatest Christmistake we make is thinking we can buy the love and happiness of our families with gifts. A home can be stuffed with expensive things yet empty of love. Maybe we make Christmistakes because we misunderstand what love is.

At Christmas, love became a Person. Love came to love people. The real meaning of Christmas is that people need presence – God’s presence and our presence- more than they need presents. In the words of Tiny Tim, God wants to bless everyone and He sends us to bless everyone. Yet we get so wrapped up in all the trimmings and tensions of this time of year that we miss the love among the wrappings.

In fact, the first Christmistake we make is thinking **Love Must Be Earned**. Scrooge believes the purpose of life is to earn as much as you can. That’s why he has no use for Christmas. When his nephew Fred invites Scrooge to Christmas dinner, his uncle blurts out a “Bah Humbug!”

“Don’t be cross, uncle!” said the nephew. “What else can I be,” returned the uncle, “when I live in a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What’s Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer;” (p. 9)

From a very early age we learn that the most valuable things are what we can earn: grades in school, goals in sports, graduate degrees, good paying jobs. Kids feel this way about Santa Claus. If they don’t behave Santa won’t leave any presents under the tree. Corrie, age 9, from New Zealand sent this email to the Jolly Old Elf.

Sorry to bother you, but my little brother just punched me while we were on your web site. I told him that was the worst place to punch somebody because you were watching us extra close there. So please do not bring him any presents unless he stops hitting people. If you insist, coal would be fine. Thank you.
Corrie, 9, Auckland, New Zealand

It’s only natural to conclude that love must be earned. We even think we must earn God’s love. All religions in this world are human attempts to make God love us. Obey the rules, perform the rituals, fulfill the requirements and then God will love you. Yet this is where Christianity is different from every world religion and philosophy. In fact the Gospel, the Good News, is not a religion. It starts with the belief there is no way we can make God love us. Now that doesn’t sound like Good News until you hear the rest of the story: we don’t have to make Him love us. There are no rules to obey, no rituals to perform, no requirements to fulfill. Why? Because He already loves us.

In fact, **God Loved Us First**. Love starts with God. The Apostle John writes, “God is love” (I John 4:16) and “We love because he first loved us” (I John 4:19). There are a lot of descriptions John could have used for God: all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, awesome, merciful, compassionate. But the one word John chose to describe God’s inner essence, His very being, is Love. Before you were born He loved you. Before you could say your own name, He called your name. Before you could reach out your arms to your parents, He reached out to you. Before you even thought of a good deed to make Him love you, He already loved you completely. And since you didn’t make Him start loving

you, you also can't stop Him from loving you. Christian marriage counselors Les and Lesslie Parrott explain God's love this way:

Consider the sun as an analogy. The sun only shines, just as God only loves. It is the nature of the sun to shine, to offer warmth and light. And it is the nature of God to love. We are free to get away from the sun—we can lock ourselves in a dark room—but we do not keep the sun from shining just because we put ourselves in a place where it cannot reach us. So it is with God's love. We can reject it, but God keeps on loving us. No matter what our choices, God still loves. And because God loves us, a relationship with God is possible.¹

You can't earn God's love and you don't have it. You can avoid it. But you can't make God stop loving you.

Scrooge shuts himself off from the Light and from Love. Yet he cannot stop his nephew's love. When Fred invites Scrooge to Christmas dinner he says,

I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!" (p. 9)

Fred says this all comes from Jesus. This love cannot be earned. This love is better than all our earnings. This love is freely given first by God. Freely Fred receives it, freely he gives it to his Uncle every year whether his Uncle will accept it or not.

Perhaps you say, "I don't feel that God loves me." The second Christmistake is to think that **Love is a Feeling**. Scrooge has no feelings for anyone. When two men ask him to give to the poor, he barks back that lazy people should go to the work houses and the prisons. They reply, "Many can't go there; and many would rather die." "If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." (p. 13). Later, when the Ghost of Christmas Present takes him to see the Cratchit family, Scrooge asks if Tiny Tim will live to see another Christmas.

"If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, none will find him here. What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." Scrooge hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief. (p. 65)

Scrooge moves from feelings of coldness and cruelty to grief and guilt. Yet feelings don't change anything. Love inspires feelings but love is more than a feeling. The truth is: **Love is an Action**. When John explains God's love he never uses emotions. He always talks in terms of actions:

¹ Les and Leslie Parrott, Relationships (Zondervan, 1998), p. 172.

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.(I John 3:18)

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (I John 4:9-10).

We were lost in sin. We were as helpless as Tiny Tim. We were separated from God and no amount of Scrooge's money could buy our way out. The Lord could have just felt sorry for us. He could have felt sympathy for us. He could have felt compassion for us. But it would have made no difference if all He did was feel for us. Instead, God showed his love by doing something. He sent His one and only Son into the world to rescue us. We say that so glibly at Christmas that we lose the immense power of His sacrifice of love. The Son of God left the safety of heaven and crossed enemy lines, waded into dangerous waters, entered occupied territory to lay down His life for us. That is love. There will be times in the best of relationships when you do not feel in love. Those are the times when you must take a step of love, reach out in love, give love. Jesus did not wait for us to be lovable. He loved us first. He loved us to the last.

That leads to the third Christmistake: **Love is Measured By Getting**. On Christmas morning, in some households there will be the inevitable comparisons: Who received more gifts? How much did they spend on me versus you? They must love you more than me. You can't measure someone's love by what you get. The truth is: **Love is Shown By Giving**. Many of us know John 3:16. Yet do you know I John 3:16:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? (I John 3:16-17)

God took the first step and loved you in Jesus. You only know this love is inside you if it comes out of you. If you keep God's love to yourself, you don't really have it. John says,

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (I John 4:7-8).

You can guarantee a continual and fresh supply of God's love if you keep the pipeline open. Let it flow through you to someone else.

Toward the end of his time with Scrooge, the Ghost of Christmas Present shows him a frightening sight,

From the foldings of its robe, it brought two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. They knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment. "Oh, Man! look here. Look, look, down here!" exclaimed the Ghost.

This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. Have they no refuge or resource?" cried Scrooge. "Are there no prisons?" said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. "Are there no workhouses?" The bell struck twelve. (pp.78-79)

Ignorance and Want. These two children were right before Scrooge's eyes all the time. Poverty, hunger, and lack of education are right before our eyes but we don't see them. If we continue to ignore Ignorance, if we continue to want nothing to do with Want, the Ghost of Christmas Present tells us it will spell Doom – doom for children, families, our cities, our society, our nation. We must open our eyes and in love do something about it.

Allison Yearley of Washington Crossing is on the board of Urban Promise. Her eyes were dramatically opened. And it only took twelve minutes.

One seemingly ordinary day about four years ago, my after school "shuttle" of kids included a trip to our high school. With only twelve minutes to spare, I jumped in the car, turned right out of my driveway and drove the well-traveled route on auto pilot, arriving just in time to pick up my daughter.

Later that evening, I was attending a meeting of the newly-formed Urban Promise Trenton. When I started my car, I noted the clock read 6:48. This time I turned left out of my driveway and headed toward Trenton. I hastily made my way to the meeting thinking I would be late. But as I pulled into the parking lot, the clock read 7:00. Exactly twelve minutes. Was that really possible? Trenton was just twelve minutes away?!

I was dumbfounded when the significance of those twelve minutes struck me. Twelve minutes in one direction took me to my kids' high school where students filed out in designer clothes and got into luxury cars. 99% graduate. Nearly all of them go on to some form of higher education. They live in a world that is relatively safe, and they take so much for granted.

Those same twelve minutes in the opposite direction took me to Trenton. Just a few blocks from a high school where the story is a stark contrast. The graduation rate hovers at 48%. Over 26% percent of residents live below the poverty level. Gangs rule the streets and recruit children as young as ten. Nothing is taken for granted, especially safety.

Those twelve minutes have become the metaphor for my time and giving. I realized that I had often put on blinders and chosen to ignore the hardships and need so very close to home. It was easy for me to focus on my own life where things are safe and comfortable. The fact is that my kids - like so many of our kids - are blessed beyond measure while others just down the road are not so fortunate.

But together we can make a difference. I encourage you to turn toward Trenton. I have seen firsthand the positive impact that Urban Promise Trenton has had on many children and teens in the city that is just miles from our own homes. Our StreetLeaders have achieved a 100% graduation rate and many are attending college. Our younger children enjoy a safe and nurturing environment in our After School Program where they receive tutoring and life skills training. Their smiling faces say it all. This Christmas please turn your focus toward the deserving young people at Urban Promise Trenton. Be a part of changing Trenton, one child at a time.

Support Urban Promise, Family Promise and Code Blue with your gifts and your time. Think of your gift as a birthday present for Jesus, a thank you for what He did for you. Let a little child remind you again of the gift of love that came down at Christmas.

Sometimes a Christmistake actually reveals the truth. Every December, Joan vowed to make Christmas a calm and peaceful experience. She cut back on nonessential activities, lots of card writing, endless baking, decorating and overspending. Yet still she felt exhausted, unable to enjoy the precious family moments and the true meaning of Christmas. Her son Nicholas was in kindergarten that year and very excited about his "Winter Concert" at school. Unfortunately, Joan had to work the night of the concert but she arranged to come to the dress rehearsal during the day.

So on the morning of the dress rehearsal, she found a spot on the cafeteria floor and sat down. Other parents quietly took their places as well. Soon students were led into the room by their teachers. Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as "Christmas," Joan didn't expect anything other than songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. So, when her son's class rose to sing, "Christmas Love," Joan was surprised by its bold title. Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates. Those in the front row-center stage held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class would sing "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C. Then, "H is for Happy," and on and on, until each child holding up his portion had presented the complete message, "Christmas Love."

The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed a small, quiet, boy in the front row who made a mistake. He was holding the letter "M" upside. The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at this little one's mistake. But he had no idea they were laughing at him. Although many teachers tried to shush the children, the laughter continued until the last letter was raised, and they all saw it together. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen. In that instant, they understood the

reason they were there, why we celebrated the holiday in the first place, why even in the chaos, there was a purpose for our celebration. For when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear:

"CHRIST WAS LOVE"

And make no mistake – He still is.