

Romans 18 - Christmas Clarity

If there is one thing that is great about moving into the gloomy days of winter it is the celebration of Christmas. The comforts of the holiday are reflected in thoughts of laying down for a long winter's nap while the children are nestled in their beds. The entrance of God in the flesh into the world defies being overlooked. Even though Jesus was most appropriately born to a humbled family in a manger because the world had no room for Him, worship from every level of creation from the angels of heaven, to the wisest men, and down to the lowly shepherds could not be held back. It is no wonder that the world draws such inspiration from Christmas. In the world's exuberance over Christmas, it is also ripe for a lot of misplaced inspiration. But, that is all compensated for by the attention sincere Christians give to the celebration.

1. Christmas confusion -

Not all inspiration is positive inspiration. It is easy to realize that for anything Godly, the wickedness of the world would be incited against it. A blatant example of this was the Satanist imposition of a statue for Satan in the Iowa state capital. There is no comparable traditional Satanic celebration at this time of the year so they have to borrow from other cultures. The inclusion of the statue was to tweak Christians. It was not to join in the celebration.

As obvious as the Satanists' attempts are, there are many other ways to create confusion over Christmas that are not so obvious.

In the false application of the First Amendment, there are those who seek a perfectly secular society with freedom *from* religion rather than freedom *of* religion. One Pennsylvania school district, in the name of inclusivity, excluded Christmas by stifling freedom of religious expression. In a veiled anti-Christian statement, bus drivers were told:

If you have decorated your bus with anything specific to the Christmas Holiday or any other decorations relating to a specific religion, please remove them immediately. In addition, employees are instructed not to wear clothing related to Christmas or any other religious holiday.

The intent was obviously against Christmas since they only named it specifically. They weakly added on "any other religious holiday" to cover their bases. A later statement tried to walk it back but only highlighted the problem.

To the extent that this reminder led to the communication that decorations and songs typically associated with the Christmas holiday were not permitted, this was not the intent, and efforts have been made internally to clarify this point to avoid any confusion moving forward.

It is not just that there is a *conspiracy against* Christmas in the world, but that too many of those who are *for* Christmas are no closer to the truth of Christmas. The way Christmas *is* recognized in the world leaves much to be desired. We are reminded of the demon possessed woman following

Paul with what *looked* like she was supporting them.

Acts 16:16-18 And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying:

17The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.

18And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

Just because something is similar doesn't make it the same thing. Her message was similar, but Christ was missing from her life. The world's message of Christmas is similar, but it is not actually Christian. Take the story of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.¹

In the story, the Grinch laments that he has had to put up with the Whos' celebration of Christmas for 53 years. Dr. Seuss was 53 when he wrote and published the book.

Dr. Seuss wrote the book quickly and was mostly finished with it within a few weeks. His biographers wrote that it was the easiest book of his career to write, except for its conclusion. According to Dr. Seuss:

I got hung up getting the Grinch out of the mess. I got into a situation where I sounded like a second-rate preacher or some biblical truism... Finally in desperation... without making any statement whatever, I showed the Grinch and the Whos together at the table, and made a pun of the Grinch carving the 'roast beast'. ... I had gone through thousands of religious choices, and then after three months it came out like that.

He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came with out ribbons! It came without tags!"
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"
And what happened then? Well...in Whoville they say,
That the Grinch's small heart Grew three sizes that day!
And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light,

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grinch>

And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!
And he, HE HIMSELF! The Grinch carved the roast beast!

After 3 months and thousands of religious choices all Dr. Seuss could come up with about Christmas was that they got to eat roast beast. Everyone thinks this is brilliant and they show it every year. But, there was no realization that Christmas was about Jesus. We don't need to condemn the Grinch story completely. As parables go, we shouldn't make them say more than they are intended to say. It is a story about hate misunderstanding love. It's not a story about salvation, especially because the Grinch is, at best, a modern made mythological figure. Where it falls short is that, since it is associated with Christmas, it makes a poor Christmas statement. The Grinch started off with a false understanding of Christmas, but the poor little Whos down in Whoville don't have any better understanding of Christmas! By the time you get done with the story, you are no closer to heaven than when you first started. The story is not mistitled. It should not be *How the Grinch Almost Stole Christmas*. By co-opting the story of Christmas, the Grinch story actually *is* successful in stealing Christmas.

The same thing is true of *A Christmas Carol*. Although Scrooge undergoes a redemption, it is not a *Christian* redemption. It is Christless redemption.

According to one estimate, there are about 600 Christmas movies available. Another listing has about 1500. There are about 50 retellings or reinterpretations of *A Christmas Carol*. Some, aim, and miss, to express the *true* meaning of Christmas. Dozens and dozens of others use the Hallmark romantic formula of how the guy and the girl have a misunderstanding but finally get together – which is *not* the true meaning of Christmas. As of these last three years, Hallmark has treated us to a guy and a guy who finally get together. The world cannot give a definition of a woman, but it fares no better in giving a definition of what Christmas is.

2. Christmas confirmation -

The world over-reacts in one way by removing the Scriptural message of Christmas. However, there is a way in which churches and preachers over-react by over-applying the Scriptures.

Because the world abuses Christmas by commercializing it does not mean that we should cancel the holiday. Every year we have to counter the commercialism with warnings about the true meaning of Christmas. We have to do this because every year there is at least the next generation that comes along who has to be instructed and every year there are those who have yet to get the true message. But if we canceled everything because of the way it is abused we would end up with the most Spartan existence. In the interest of military, the ancient Greek Spartans lived with minimal comforts, possessions, and indulgences, often emphasizing strict discipline and focus on essential needs over luxury or excess. Celebrating *anything* can be abused. Technology can be abused. Welfare can be abused. Church can be abused. The objective should be to do Christmas right, not cancel it.

Let's also consider why preaching about Christmas fits into our series of messages from the book of Romans. In the whole question about the application of the Law, there was a lingering question about feasts and dietary customs from the Jewish background of Christianity. In the interest of Christian liberty, the appropriateness of celebrating Christmas will be covered.

Rom 14:1-10 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, *but* not to doubtful disputations.
2For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.
3Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.
4Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.
5One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day *alike*. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.
6He that regardeth the day, regardeth *it* unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard *it*. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.
7For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.
8For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.
9For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.
10But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

When it comes to Christmas, there is a growing sentiment in some churches that we shouldn't recognize it because we should be celebrating Christ *every* Sunday, not just one day out of the year. You could turn this around and suggest that the problem is not that we are celebrating Christmas *one* day, but we should celebrate Christmas *every* Sunday. This might not actually be a bad idea except that people will probably get tired of it. No, we don't know exactly which day Christ was born. Christmas does not correspond to a pagan holiday. There is evidence that the pagans created a holiday to compete with the Christians. Shepherds actually *do* take their sheep out in December when the region's rains provide abundant pastures for the sheep. But all that hardly matters because the important thing is that we recognize Christ. If not December 25, then pick a day. It won't help because then *that* day will come under attack for a host of reasons.

What makes this whole issue significant is a principle in our Christian walk about what we permit or don't permit. There is a growing faction of Christianity that holds that worship should only include things that the Bible explicitly commands or sanctions.² This comes from a time when people were trying to get back to the Bible as our spiritual guide instead of man's laws. This sounds good, but when applied it has led to extremes, such as the elimination of hymns, singing only the Psalms. They also might eliminate instrumental music. Skits and anything not exclusively preaching are not allowed. Recognition of any holiday is excluded, which includes Christmas. It doesn't take long to see the inconsistencies that would arise and the stretch of interpretation. Was David wrong to use a harp? What about the command to sing not just psalms, but hymns and spiritual songs in Col 3:16? The early church did not have an air conditioned or heated building to meet in. Should we eliminate church buildings?

The alternate view is that elements in worship that are not explicitly commanded in Scripture are

²This is known as the Regulative Principle of Worship.

permitted, as long as they are not explicitly forbidden.³ The guiding principle for this may be found in 1Cor 6:12.

1Cor 6:12 All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

What we see in Romans is that there are those who are weak, or more cautious in other words, but each should be allowed to be convinced in their hearts about what they do. Each must be fully persuaded in his own mind. As long as it is not anti-Scriptural, recognize that others are trying to focus on the Lord.

This is something we should not obsess over lest it have power over us and dominate our thinking. Our objective is to not focus on the means of delivering the message, but the message itself of Christ.

3. Christmas clarity -

Well intentioned Christians attempt to put a positive spin on anything Christmas. We need to be sure to apply ourselves to understanding God's perspective just as we do in anything else. This is very much like the position the Berean Jews came to when Paul preached to them. Paul had come from the Jews in Thessalonica where he had been assaulted and mistreated. He had an entirely different reception at the synagogue in Berea.

Acts 17:11-12 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

12Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.

To cut through man's confusion, we need the clarity of God's Word to cut through man's confusion. The bright Christmas lights are supposed to draw attention to the message of Christmas. The lights, the festivities, and the tradition are not the message. The message of Christmas is the incarnation. God became man because He was born to die for our sins.

John 1:1-14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2The same was in the beginning with God.

...

14And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

Heb 2:6-18 But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful

³This is known as the Normative Principle of Worship.

of him? or the son of man, that thou visitest him?

7Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands:

8Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing *that is* not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him.

9But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.

10For it became him, for whom *are* all things, and by whom *are* all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

11For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified *are* all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren,

12Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.

13And again, I will put my trust in him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me.

14Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;

15And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

16For verily he took not on *him the nature of* angels; but he took on *him* the seed of Abraham.

17Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto *his* brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

18For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

You may have missed the message of Christmas because you were distracted by all the trappings. All of that was supposed to magnify Christ, but the *message* is that Jesus became a man so that as man and God He could offer Himself as the sacrifice for man to take our sins and judgment of Hell. We don't have to just leave Jesus lying in a manger and wait until Easter to preach that part of the message.

If you are not saved, don't just be satisfied with a Grinch's Christmas because you will truly be robbed of what Christmas is all about. Receive the full gift of Christmas which is eternal salvation paid for with the blood of Christ.

If you are saved already, give others the gift that keeps on giving and celebrate Christmas *every* day that way.

1. Christmas confusion - Acts 16:16-18
2. Christmas confirmation - Rom 14:1-10, 1Cor 6:12
3. Christmas clarity - Acts 17:11-12, John 1:1-14, Heb 2:6-18