
Series: "The Christmas You've Always Wanted"

Message #1: "God's Christmas Gift To You"

"A Christmas Story" is a movie told from the perspective of 10-year old boy, Ralphie. It's a kid's-eye view of an all-American Christmas in the 1940s. And all little Ralphie wants under the tree on Christmas morning is a Red-Ryder BB gun. Specifically, he wants an official Red Ryder carbine action two-hundred shot range model air rifle. He not only wants it, but as you saw, he's consumed with an aching desire for it. Unfortunately, his mother and even Santa Claus shatter his dreams by foretelling the imminent risk of permanent visual damage that will inevitably result from the purchase of a toy as dangerous as a BB gun. Over and over again he is denied by the words: "You'll shoot your eye out kid!"

My guess is, many of us can look back at Christmas from years ago and remember a time when we too, wanted a gift like Ralphie and didn't get it. Yes, even me. It's painful to recall but one year I too, had my Christmas dreams shattered. That year I made my Christmas request crystal clear. I wanted "Hugo: Man of A Thousand Faces." There's a reason you probably have never heard of Hugo. He's never made it the way GI Joe or Barbie did. Hugo is not considered to be a classic toy the way Hot Wheels or Mr. Potato head or Monopoly might be.

You see, Hugo was just a head. A mannequin head. He looked like a guy from the Blue Man Group, except he wasn't blue. Like I said, Hugo was just a head. And a pretty creepy looking head at that. But the great thing about Hugo was, he was a man of a thousand faces. Hugo came standard with a complete set of hairpieces. He had wigs, beards, mustaches, eyebrows, sideburns. As well as glasses, make-up, hats, scars, pimples, you-name-it.

I don't remember exactly how old I was when Hugo was on the market—maybe 8 or 9 years old—but to me, Hugo, and the great plethora of disguises that were mine to create, was the ultimate Christmas gift. So I told my mom and dad that this is what I wanted. Looking at it today with the eyes of an adult, he definitely creeps you out a little bit.

In fact, I have my suspicions that my mom and dad probably had a few reservations about this. Now they claimed that they tried to find Hugo in the toy stores. They allegedly searched high and lo for this gift, but regrettably, they told me, Hugo could not be found. I doubt it was because Hugo had been sold out. I now believe my parents feared for my future—that I had secret desire to grow up to be a hairdresser or something—not that there's anything wrong with that! But for me Hugo, was not to be.

Now really, is this what Christmas is all about? We all know, as wonderful as gift-giving is, Christmas isn't about presents, or Santa Claus, or stockings hanging from the chimney with care.

What is the message of Christmas? Let me summarize it. I can say it real quick—the message of Christmas is this: **God loves you.** Believe it or not, you are important to God! You're important to God because he cared enough about you to send a personal Christmas gift. God sent Christ to earth to let you know that you matter to Him.

That's the whole message of Christmas. What I want to do as I preach each week leading up to Christmas is this: I want help us to focus on what Christmas is really all about. Because, unfortunately, these days, Jesus isn't mentioned much in the secular celebration of Christmas. In fact, you can't even put up a nativity scene around town without it becoming a federal case.

Instead, there's a word that we'll hear more and more as Christmas day draws closer—and it's not Jesus. It's a word people are more comfortable with. The most common word used this season is the word "gift" or "giving." You'll hear Christmas referred to as: "the gift-giving season." Now there's nothing inherently wrong gifts or giving. And surprising each other with presents and trying to guess what's in all those packages under the Christmas tree is part of the excitement that makes Christmas fun. I'm not down on that. Giving presents is at Christmas is great. Anytime we give a present to someone, we are able in a very real way to express our love, appreciation, respect, approval, sympathy, concern or love to someone.

But if Christmas only exists for the selling, buying, giving, receiving and exchanging of gifts, then we've all missed the point. The Christmas you've always longed for is far more appealing, far more satisfying than the giving and receiving of gifts.

Consider how shallow the Biblical story of Christmas becomes when we recast the story into today's consumer context. Listen to this:

“And there were in that same country, children keeping watch over their socks by firelight. And lo, Santa Claus came upon them; and the glory of his presence shone ‘round about them, and they were so enthralled.

“And Santa said unto them, ‘Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great gifts which shall be to all people (with the money to afford them). For unto you is cooked this day in the oven of your kitchen—a turkey, which is basted and stuffed.’

“And this shall be a sign unto you, ye shall find your gifts wrapped in sparkling paper and lying in a pile under the tree.

“And suddenly there was with the children a great multitude of earthly relatives, praising each other and saying, ‘Thank you, this is just what I always wanted.’”

You see, when you put it this way, there's something strange, something missing. The emphasis we put on gift-giving at Christmas often hides the fact that the first Christmas really centered around a special gift never-before given and never-since equaled.

The tradition of gift-giving began because God gave you a gift at the very first Christmas. And He wrapped his gift in flesh. And he delivered that gift through the Holy Spirit to a mother named, Mary. And she gave birth to a special child. The Son of God. God has a gift for you and His gift is Jesus Christ.

And you know what, Jesus is the kind of gift that never stops giving. Have you ever received a gift inside of a gift? I had a friend one time who got a pair of gloves from her parents. And as she tried the gloves on there was a twenty dollar bill in each finger. Now if you have five fingers like most people, you can do the math, that's \$100 bucks! That's a pretty good gift. A surprise gift within a gift.

That's the way Jesus is. When you accept the gift of Jesus Christ, and open your heart to Him, there are additional gifts—surprise gifts that go along with Him. And there's three specific gifts that I want show you today. You can write these down on your outline. The Christmas gifts found in Christ that I'm sharing with you today come from a very brief passage from Luke chapter 2. Open up your Bible, or look on your outline. Luke 2.

Look with me, first at verses 8-12 we read: *"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'"*

This is the story of Jesus. And his life here on earth began like ours. He came into the world the same way all of us did. As a baby at birth. And if that's all Jesus is to you—a baby born at Christmas—then you're not seeing the whole picture. You have yet to experience the overwhelming generosity of Jesus that only began at the nativity in Bethlehem. Remember, Jesus is a gift that keeps on giving.

Now a new baby is a gift in itself. But remember, there's a gift within the gift—when you accept the gift of Christ—there's more! Here's what we learn from this passage. This Christmas accept God's gifts that are in Christ Jesus.

1. Accept God's Gift of joy.

Notice in verse 10 the angel said, *"I bring you good news of great joy."* On your outline (or in your Bible) I want you to circle or underline the word "joy." Another translation says: *"I bring you the most joyful news ever announced."*

Jesus is a gift meant to bring you joy. Now by this I don't mean that once you have Jesus everything will be perfect. Because life, with or without Jesus is filled with pain, heartache, worry, and fear. But what I mean by this is: Joy is something that God wants everyone to experience regardless of your circumstances. And it was into this world of pain, heartache, worry and fear that God sent his Son Jesus Christ.

You see, God is not some cosmic kill joy in the sky, sitting up there waiting to deal you a bad hand, waiting to make your life miserable. A lot of people think that faith and boredom go together. Years ago, Billy Joel had a hit song called: "Only the Good Die Young." One of the lyrics in the song echo the feeling of many in our world today. Billy Joel said: "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints."

You see, there's this stereotype of religious people that they're boring, not fun to be around. They enjoy feeling guilty and making others feel guilty and miserable as well. And let's face it, there's a reason why unbelievers feel that way. Too many churches start at 11:00 sharp and end at 12:00 dull. They're boring—not this church of course! But maybe you have this misconception that God doesn't want you to smile. You're a sinner. You've got to pay for that. You should feel guilty. Life is no laughing matter.

But that's not God at all. Look at what God says again. *"I come to give you good news of great joy."* You see, one of the gifts God wants you to have is He wants you to have joy. He wants to bring deep lasting happiness to your life. Jesus said himself in John 10:10: *"I have come [why?] that [you] may have life—and have it to the full."* Jesus came so that you could enjoy life like never before! God wants you to make the most of your life, not to waste it or abuse it, but to make your life count. So, number 1: Accept God's gift of joy.

2. Accept God's Gift Of Hope.

I want you to look back at a phrase in Luke 2 verse 11... *"Today in the town of David [Bethlehem] a Savior has been born to you..."* Circle the word "Savior." Do you know that word means? The word "Savior" is directly related to the word salvation.

What is salvation? What does it mean? It means three things. It means **forgiveness** for your past, it means **freedom** from the problems that mess you up in the present, and it means **fulfillment** in your future—for all eternity. Forgiveness, freedom and fulfillment. That's what salvation is all about. And being "saved" is something that brings hope.

Growing up I played a lot of soccer. And most of my soccer experience took place in the goal mouth. I was a goalkeeper. Now a goalie's job is real simple. If the ball is coming at you. You stop it. You "save" it from going into the net. And if you don't bad things happen. The other team scores. You look like a fool. If it happens too often your team probably will lose.

You see, as a goalie I knew how important it was to make a "save." In fact, I used to throw my body around to do whatever I could to make a save. If I couldn't save a ball with my hands, I'd use my face, my stomach, my big toe, my rear end—It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was keeping the ball out of the net—making the save.

You know what, Jesus does that too. His job as your Savior is to do whatever he needs to do to keep you from going to hell. So what did He do?

John MacArthur says this: **"Without forsaking His divine nature or diminishing His deity in any sense, He was born into our world as a tiny infant."** [God With Us; p.86]

You need to understand the lengths Jesus went to in order to save us. He voluntarily left the most wonderful place that exists—Heaven—and He came here, to a place that although it is not hell, it certainly is not heaven. And He (the all-wise and all-powerful God) willingly subjected himself to the limits of being human. He didn't give up being God, but [as Philippians 2:5-8 more fully

explains to us] he voluntarily gave up the use of the privileges and powers that were available to Him as God.

He chose to humble himself. He chose not be served, but to serve. And he chose to die. No one took his life from. He gave it willingly. In fact, at the cross just before He died, he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He gave his life. Why? In order to save you. In order to bring you forgiveness, freedom and fulfillment. In order to give you hope.

John 3:17 tells us that: *"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."* He's our Savior. The One who offers salvation. He didn't come to put you down, He came to lift you up. So accept God's gift of joy. Accept God's gift of hope....

3. Accept God's Gift Of Peace.

Look at Luke 2:13-14. It says: *"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'"*

Circle the word "peace" in verse 14. The gift of Jesus Christ is God's way of taking the initiative in repairing the broken relationship that sin has caused between us and Him.

Not only that but, God wants you to have good relationships with other people, not just with Him. He says, "I want you to first get your life right with Me and then you can get your life right with other people." I believe that Christmas is a time for reconciliation. It's a time to break down barriers, build bridges, restore relationships that have been broken and damaged. It's a time to say, "I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

For many people, Christmas is a very tense time because it means dealing with relatives you have unresolved issues with. It may even be your husband or wife. But you know what? Reconciliation is possible. Jesus has made this possible. Once you've made peace of God—you can make peace with anybody.

The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:18: *"All this [salvation] is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."*

In other words, God settled the relationship between us and him by sending Jesus, and now in turn, God calls us to settle our relationships with each other. Some of you are saying, "But you don't know my family. You don't know my husband. You don't know wife. You don't know what they did to me. I could never forgive them." That's why you need Jesus Christ. Human forgiveness and human love have a limit. That's why the divorce rate is so high.

Human love runs out. Which is why you need God's love in your life. Because it never runs out. There's an endless supply of it. What you have to do if you want to take this ministry of reconciliation seriously is say, "Lord, I can't do it. You have to love that person through me." And God will do that. Because God wants you to have peace with Him, and harmony with others.

You know, one of the blessings we receive quite often at Christmas time comes in the written or spoken phrase: "Merry Christmas." We hear that a lot. It's a greeting or wish for joy, hope, and peace during this Christmas time of year.

But how can you and I make that wish come true? How can we make this year the kind of Christmas we've always longed for?

I mean is it really possible to be "merry" in the kind of world we live in? I'll admit, it's not always easy to cope with Christmas, but it is possible to be "merry," if we follow a few **simple suggestions** this time around....

1. Make a deliberate effort to reduce the holiday pressures on yourself and others.

One way to do this is to start your preparations early, eliminate what really does not need to be done, and plan activities that will focus on the real meaning of Christmas, the birth of God's Son. I don't mean to brag here, I pretty much finished my Christmas shopping already! And you know what, we have more Christmas decorations than we know what to do with and my wife decided—she's not going to put them all out this year. She's simplifying the Christmas décor. And it's okay. She doesn't feel guilty about it!

Let's face it, most of the busyness of Christmas is our own fault. It comes because of poor planning, procrastination, or disorganization, and it tends to crowd out Christ.

So let's not over commit ourselves. Perhaps as part of our Christmas planning, instead of running around from here to there and everywhere, maybe what we need to do is take the advice of the David in Psalm 46:10. We need to spend more time considering how we can be still at Christmas and know that He is God.

2. Be more alert to the needs of others and aware of ways in which you can help those who are lonely, discouraged or in special need this Christmas.

What this means is give some of your time, money, or energy to make someone feel wanted and remembered. It may mean opening your home to someone who has no one to spend Christmas with. Or it may mean giving to those who have less than you do. Every Christmas we spend so many dollars on gifts and food for our own families and not enough on others who are lonely or needy. Think about that, pray about it as a family and respond to how God leads you.

3. Parents: give special consideration to what you are teaching your children at Christmas.

Saying little about the Christ of Christmas, over stressing frenzied activity or the receiving of gifts, teaching children a devotion to Santa Claus, doing nothing to minister to the needs of others—these are all ways in which we teach children that Christmas is something other than a celebration of Christ's coming. So parents, talk about Christ this Christmas. Do something intentional as a family that shows more than just token reference to baby Jesus in the manger.

4. All of us must actively draw near to God at Christmas time.

Caught up in the holiday season, it's easy to let our devotional life slip and even forget temporarily about spiritual things. But a Christ-centered, merry Christmas will not come automatically. It comes when you plan ahead and deliberately make room for Christ in your

holiday celebrations. Be sure to slow down this week and draw near to the God who sent His greatest gift to you and me at Christmas— Jesus Christ.

Closing Prayer

Communion Intro

When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the 16th century, he brought along samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it.

The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child—much like the one you see here on the screen. But when Ricci produced paintings of the crucifixion and when he tried to explain that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, his audience reacted with disgust and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshiping her rather than the crucified God.

If we're not careful, that can be our tendency as well. I think subconsciously might even prefer that. We would much rather stick with the mellow, domesticated holiday portrait of Mary holding Jesus than look off into the distance and stare at the bloody atrocity that took place on the cross at Calvary. But Jesus didn't want us to forget about what happened there. In fact, as wonderful as the nativity was—more important for us to recall is the cross. Instead of the serenity of his infancy, Jesus wants us rather, to remember His nail-scarred hands and thorn-torn brow. And ultimately He wants us to know of His victory over sin and death.

The Bread

That's why at the Last Supper on the night before He died, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it. And He gave it to His disciples and said: *“This is My body given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”*

The Cup

Also, at the Last Supper Jesus took a cup of wine and before passing it around to His disciple to drink He said: *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. Drink this in remembrance of Me.”*

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the joy, the peace, the hope that we have in you. Thank you for a time to remember that today as we celebrate Communion. I pray that would help us to prepare for the celebration of your birth this Christmas. In Jesus name, Amen.