



"It is human to err; it is devilish to remain willfully in error."
—Augustine

10-Dec-04

The Conundrum of Christmas Cheer

"Merry [Christmas!](#)"

"Happy holidays!"

Around this time of the year, we hear these greetings and well-wishes frequently in the normal flow of our lives. They are usually accompanied by a warm smile, although the clerk at the mall—her feet killing her from standing at the cash register for hours and her [patience](#) frazzled by the hundreds of customers she has assisted already that day—says it with a forced grin. The seasonal cheer is so infectious, says Dickens, that even old Scrooge finally succumbed, overcoming his miserly, bah-humbug ways. Everybody lives happily ever after.

This just emphasizes one of the glaring contradictions of Christmas: All the overdone jollity of the season serves to hide the well-known fact that December is the most depressing time of the year for many people. It is a time that mainstream Christians are supposed to be celebrating a joyous event—the alleged birthday of the Savior, Jesus Christ—yet it leads the year in suicide, depression, and aggravation. Why?

The answer is very simple: The holiday and all its trappings are not godly. This means that its fruits will not be good (see the principle in [Matthew 7:15-20](#) and [Galatians 6:7-8](#)). Ergo, the Christmas season is full of angst, frustration, and disappointment, and many people deal poorly with these negative emotions.

What has become the central focus of the Christmas season? Undoubtedly, in our consumer-oriented society, it is the gift-giving and -receiving—Christmas presents, in other words. First, there is little about worshipping Christ in it. Yes, to put a good face on it, many will point to the fact that the Magi presented Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but the Bible says nothing about them presenting each other gifts! In fact, the Bible mentions this kind of "joyous" gift-giving in a totally negative sense: in celebration of the deaths of the [Two Witnesses \(Revelation 11:10\)](#)!

A second justification for mutual gift-giving comes out of [Acts 20:35](#), where Paul quotes Jesus as saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." But this is just that—a justification. The common motive for giving gifts is to ensure getting them in return! The better gifts one gives, the better the chance of receiving equally good ones. The principle Jesus taught is to give without expectation of receiving in return ([Luke 6:35](#)). Some may give gifts selflessly, but since gift-giving is an expected practice among those who celebrate Christmas, there is certainly an element of obligation in it that causes apprehension.

Third, the commercialization of Christmas has become entirely centered on fulfilling the individual's desires. A cursory viewing of television ads proves this in spades. For instance, a BMW commercial portrays a woman receiving the same old tired gifts from her off-beat relatives, so to forestall her total disappointment, she buys *herself* a new BMW! One radio advertisement for a diamond store features a woman whining because her husband presented her with a two-carat diamond from one prestigious store, when he could have shopped at a discount store and purchased a stunning, three-carat diamond for the same price. Commercials are always aimed at fulfilling selfish desires—and they always promise disappointment if the desire is not fulfilled.

Finally, we should not forget to mention that all these gifts cost money—and lots of it. This, in turn, creates financial headaches and fears that take months or years to cure. Many people max-out their credit cards during the Christmas shopping season and spend the rest of the year paying them off. Or not. With the average American up to his eyeballs in credit-card debt—to the tune of many thousands of dollars—it is easy to see why so many dread this time of year.

The apostle James puts his finger on the real spirit of this time of the year: "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" ([James 3:14-16](#)). Christmas is a "lie against the truth." It is not biblical. [God](#) never commanded it. December 25 is not Jesus' birthday. He cannot be worshipped through Santa Claus, Christmas trees, Yule logs, mistletoe, and eggnog. So how can we expect anything good to come out of it?

This lie comes not from heaven but from earth, where [Satan](#) and his demons toy with human emotions and selfishness to deceive and destroy men and women. This results in people comparing themselves with the Joneses and putting themselves in competition with others to see who has the most. It produces "confusion and every evil thing." No wonder people are so miserable!

This holiday has only the thinnest veneer of cheer. If we peel back that gossamer layer, we find gloom, anxiety, and hopelessness. Does that sound like something God wants us to be involved with?

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Announcing . . . Christ's Birth!](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The world, with all its Christmas celebration, has depleted all the precious meaning from the actual event, depriving us of the glory of what really happened in the announcement of Christ's birth. Luke, having incredible literary skills, gives us the journalistic "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why" of Christ's birth in a concise and palatable form. A fresh reading of Luke's account reveals the rich prophetic significance of this event, unraveling some doctrinal heresies of the world's religions (Mary worship, nature of Holy Spirit, and time of Christ's birth) and the comfort of the overshadowing presence of God. Mary's and Joseph's thoughtful, reflective, humble, obedient, and submissive examples provide a sterling pattern for us to emulate.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Christmas, Syncretism, and Presumption](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Many think keeping Christmas is fine because it honors Christ, yet God never tells us to celebrate the day of His Son's birth. John Ritenbaugh explains that it is presumptuous on many Christians' parts to believe that such a syncretized holiday could please God.

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