

## The Grace of Christmas

Tonight is called Nine Lessons and Carols. Except, tonight, you got a bonus tenth lesson, an extra Bible reading - the one we just heard from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. And it tells us something about Christmas that has the power to change your life. In fact, it tells us three things. It tells us about the Grace of Christmas, the Challenge of Christmas, and the Power of Christmas.

### The Grace of Christmas

Now, when we talk about grace, we're not talking about *saying* 'grace', and giving thanks for your Christmas dinner. And we're not talking about a famous actress called Grace whose films get re-run at Christmas. We're talking about an attitude of overflowing generosity to others, even, especially, when they don't deserve it. I mean, if you screw up, and someone shows you grace, it means they treat you *way* better than you deserve to be treated.

And that kind of generosity almost defines what we appreciate about Christmas, doesn't it? I mean, probably *the* most famous Christmas story is not *The Grinch*, or *Elf*, or *It's a Wonderful Life*, but Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. And it has generosity as its theme. And its main character is Ebenezer Scrooge, a man portrayed as all that is opposite to the spirit of Christmas. He is anything *but* generous and gracious. He's secret, he's solitary; he's squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching and covetous. Whereas, in the words of Scrooge's nephew, Fred, Christmas is 'a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable time... ; the only time... in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely.' In other words, Christmas is all about a generosity of heart and hand. It's all about grace.

And yet, real generosity, real grace, is much more than giving a few gifts at Christmas or making the odd charitable donation, isn't it? In fact, in that tenth lesson, Paul talks about a kind of generosity of heart, a grace, that puts others first, before yourself. Listen to what he says: 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit'. In other words, don't let the motivating principle of your life, what guides your decision making, what drives you, be what best serves your interests, or what you can get out of it, or what promotes you and makes you number one. Instead, he says, 'in humility count others more significant than yourselves.' In other words, be motivated by an attitude that genuinely puts others' interests first, above your own; an attitude that genuinely sees others, and their needs, as more important than yourself.

And when you see someone doing that, in the way they sacrifice themselves for others, or speak about others, and they do it happily, it's deeply attractive, isn't it? And when you know someone like that, deep down there's a part of you that wishes you were more like that. And just think how different the world would be if more of us *were* like that. I mean, at Christmas the shops tell you that if you just have this new toy, or this electronic gadget, or this new piece of clothing, your life, your world, will be so much better.

But think how much better the world would be if more people had a gracious, generous, self-sacrificial attitude that genuinely thought of others' needs as more important than their own. I mean, sure a bit shopping therapy makes you feel better for a while, but think of the transformative power of the kind of attitude Paul is talking about. Because think how many of the world's problems are caused by governments, or groups, or individuals failing to behave like this, but instead thinking life is a game of top trumps, and their interests beat everyone else's.

So, when we see this kind of attitude in others we really like it, and we can see how it could transform the world if everyone lived it year round, and yet, when it comes to us, it's hard to do, isn't it?

## The Challenge of Christmas

Now, I'll let you into a secret, I am not a keen Christmas shopper. Number one, there are way too many people. And number two, deciding what to buy is a nightmare. But buying and giving a gift is easy in comparison to putting other people first, or genuinely counting someone else as more significant than yourself.

I mean, just think, the last time someone treated you like a servant, how did it feel? Or that time when someone *insisted* on having their way, and just the way they spoke, and behaved, made it *really* clear that you and your opinion counted for nothing, what did that feel like? You see, whether it's voluntary, or imposed, we struggle to put others first and ourselves second, especially when we think they don't deserve it.

In other words, we struggle with grace. And so, if we're honest, we're often part of the problem of self-centredness, out there in the world, or even just in our relationships, rather than part of the solution.

I mean, kids, when you're playing football, or any other sport, do you ever find yourself *not* wanting to pass the ball, because you want to score the goal? And you certainly don't want to pass the ball to that *other* player who's *always* scoring goals, *and* who's always boasting about scoring goals, do you?

Or, adults, do you ever find yourself weighing up a decision at work based on the criteria, 'how does this help me? Or further me?' Or, if you're an academic, do you ever notice the tiniest bit of resentment rising up when that other researcher's name keeps cropping up, and she's published again? Especially when, deep down, you just *know* you're better than them.

Or for those of us who are married, how many of our... discussions... are caused by the fact that our partner clearly doesn't understand that my opinion, or preferences, simply carry more weight than theirs?

So, we all struggle to take the position of the one who serves. We all struggle *not* to live with *me* at the centre of my motivation. And the question is, Why?

Well, look why Paul says Jesus could behave like this: 'he... did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.' But for us, it strikes at the heart of where we get our identity and value from. You see, we tend to think that we matter in life, we count for something, when we're on top, when we're the one being noticed, or listened to, or preferred, and we tend to think we cease to matter when we're not. And we *want* to matter and we're *afraid* of not mattering. So unlike Jesus, it's as if we *do* grasp at being equal with God, we want to be top of the pile. And so this generous, sacrificial, gracious attitude to others has a hard time gaining ground in our lives, because deep down, we think we really should matter most, and if *anyone's* to be preferred, it should be me.

I don't know if you saw it, but a few weeks ago the actress Emma Watson, of Harry Potter fame, declared that rather than being single, she was *self-partnered*. Which has sparked a whole load of debate about the freedom that comes when your sense of self-worth isn't tied to being in a relationship or not. But the danger is that, single or married, we can all think that the only one *really* worth giving myself for, is me.

So, how can this generous, happy grace of preferring others, and counting others more significant than ourselves, take root in our lives, and not just at Christmas but all year round?

## **The Power of Christmas**

Now, imagine that you're in a city, and you're trying to get to this destination, but you're lost. So you go up to someone in the street and ask them, 'I'm really sorry, but can you tell me how I can get to such and such a place?' And the person says, 'ooh, you can't get there from here, if I was trying to get there, I'd start from somewhere totally different.' Now, if that would be frustrating when you're lost in a city, it's sadly true for finding our way to this life of generous grace that genuinely puts others first. We just struggle to do it voluntarily, and we resent it when it's imposed on us. We can't get there from here.

But Christmas tells us that if we're lost in the city of life and we know the kind of life we want to get to, but just can't get there from here, we have a Father who comes and searches for us, to take us there. It tells us that in Christ, God has entered our world to find us and lead us to a life of life-changing grace.

And in v7 Paul says Jesus 'emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.' And in v8 he says that Jesus 'humbled himself.' So the very things we struggle to do, to humble ourselves, and serve others, God did. And to do it he became much less than he is. You see, we tend to think of humanity, with our intellect and our culture-making, as the pinnacle, as good as it gets. And, in many ways, that's right. But when God the Son of God became like one of us, and was born as a baby, and laid in an animals' feeding trough, he was emptying himself.

But then, Paul says, Jesus went even lower. He humbled himself 'to death'. But not just death, '*even* death on a cross.' Why that little word, 'even'? '*Even* death on a cross.' Because amazingly, incredibly, the Son of God began his life in the poverty of the stable, but it ended in the shame of crucifixion. And to the Romans, this was a death so shameful no citizen could die like that. And to the Jews only those cursed of God could die like that. Yet Jesus humbled himself even that low. Why?

Simply because he loves you. And Jesus emptied himself that you might be filled, filled with his love. He served you that you might be honoured, and welcomed into his family. He died for you, that you might be forgiven all those times you have put yourself first and pushed to be number 1.

And Paul says it's seeing that at his birth, and in his death, Christ humbled himself for you, and counted your needs above his own, even when you didn't deserve it, that has the power to humble you, because you realise, he had to go that low for me. But it also lifts you up, because you realise he did go that low for you. And that gives you a deep security. A security that comes from knowing that God loves you so much Christ became nothing for you. A security that takes away your fear of what others think of you, so you don't need to boost your sense of self-worth by constantly pushing yourself forward. A security that frees you to treat others with the same generous grace with which God has treated you: the grace of Christmas, in the power of Christmas, not just at Christmas but the whole year round.