

## **Spend Less: Who's Birthday is it anyway?**

### **Introduction:**

Who here is familiar with the concept of sibling gifts on birthdays? I have just recently heard about this practice because it is something that I did not grow up with. Basically, parents will buy a small gift to give to the sibling(s) on their brother or sisters birthday so that they do not feel jealous. Now, I don't want to offend anybody here who might practice this, but to me, the idea seems pretty ridiculous. I grew up knowing that it was my brother's birthday and so he got the gifts. This doesn't necessarily mean that I wasn't jealous about it. But I think that the lesson learned was greater than any possible damage that "jealousy" gave me. When we practice things like the "sibling gift," we create unrealistic expectations that everything is about us; even on other's special days, we will ultimately get served. What is it about our society that makes us so reluctant to give a person or holiday exclusivity? And what are the lessons that we are ultimately teaching and learning through this? After all, whose birthday is it, really?

That's the question we're going to ask ourselves today; at Christmastime, whose birthday is it anyway?

**Focus Thought:** Christmas is a season in which we try to juggle our earthly celebration with our heavenly one, and oftentimes Jesus gets put in the backseat to consumerism and spending. In order to fully experience the Christmas season, we need to prioritize Christ, which means changing, at least in part, the way that we respond to our the cultural pressures focusing on purchasing and giving and receiving.

**Big Idea:** During this season, we give a lot of our presence to presents. What does that mean? We give a lot of ourselves, our presence, to those things that we are purchasing for other people, presents. We spend our emotional and spiritual presence in taking time to think about what to purchase for people for Christmas and where the money is coming from, and how we're going to pay those bills later. We spend our physical presence in the shopping process, meaning driving to shop, waiting in lines, and driving home. By the time these things are done, our reserve of presence is fairly depleted. We don't have the energy to spend with other people, let alone with Christ, the center of this season.

***By spending less of our presence on presents, we are freer to be present to God this season.***

**Transition:**

Today, we're going to explore the nativity character Joseph and see how the sacrifice of self can lead to the ultimate reward of being present to and for Christ. In the nativity story, Joseph faced a crisis decision: stay with an unwed mother pregnant by the Holy Spirit and risk reputation, or preserve one's self by divorcing her. It was a decision over where his "presence" would lie. He could have chosen to give his presence to himself and his own character; after all, culture dictated that divorce was permissible in case of adultery. Or, he could choose to give his presence to the infant Christ, the Son of God. This was the crisis decision that Joseph faced.

**Transition:**

To get a clear picture of the sacrifice and reward involved in this story, we're going to break it down into three parts: The struggle, the choice, and the reward.

### **The Struggle:**

Because we've heard the Nativity story so many times, and because we've seen it in children's book and cartoons, I think we tend to overlook the scandal of this situation. Here was a young, teenage girl pledged to be married to a young carpenter, Joseph, when, before the wedding, she finds herself to be pregnant. By the Holy Spirit! But, she was pregnant nonetheless. How could Mary explain this to her family, to Joseph? Adultery: That would be the word on everyone's mind as she confessed the situation.

At a time that should have been filled with great joy, marriage, Joseph faced a very difficult situation. Imagine the inner turmoil. What would you have felt? Joseph was human, after all, and I imagine that he felt the same things that many of us would feel: betrayal, jealousy, and maybe even a need to be vindicated, to get even.

This was the struggle, and now he had to make a choice.

### **The Choice:**

The NIV gives this passage the heading "Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son," which might seem very strange to us. The word "accept" could give one the idea that Joseph had a choice and that he might not have chosen Jesus. Well, believe it or not, Joseph had a choice in all of this. In fact, he had a number of choices. And do you know what the first

and most important question he had to answer was? It's probably not what you think; it wasn't whether or not he would stay with Mary. She had betrayed him by sleeping with another man; culture dictated that he did not or should not stay with her. His choice, then, was whether or not he should have her killed. Remember, it was permissible, according to OT law, to divorce because of adultery. What you many not remember is that it was permissible to have the adulteress stoned because of her actions. Joseph could've been publically proved right in the whole situation, and he could have unleashed his anger on her.

This was his first choice.

And yet God knew Joseph, and He knew Joseph's heart. Before any of this was even set into motion, God had specifically chosen Joseph because he was an honorable man. Joseph decided to quietly divorce Mary and in doing so allowed her to retain her dignity.

So, things were all said and done with Joseph. He had made his decision; now he just had to get on with life...or so he thought.

Surprise of all surprises, Joseph's role in this scandalous story was not yet done. Soon after he had made probably the most difficult decision in his life, an angel appeared to him and said, "Not so fast Joseph. You're not done yet." And the angel filled Joseph in on the rest of the story; that this was no ordinary child conceived by an ordinary man. This was the son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph was now responsible to raise Him as his own.

## **The Reward:**

So, Joseph sacrificed himself, his pride and reputation, and for what? Realize, that those around them would have been very suspicious of the two, and by not divorcing Mary, Joseph was putting himself in a position to appear to be the father of this illegitimate child. Knowing that this was the son of God did not change the fact that Joseph was going to deal with some stuff. But, with this sacrifice came a great reward.

In giving up his rights, the right to justification and reputation in the eyes of his community, Joseph was able to be fully present for the coming of the Christ. Joseph got to experience the savior, firsthand, in a way that he could not have if he had decided to do the sensible thing and separate himself from the situation. But God isn't sensible.

## **Transition:**

So what can we learn about sacrifice and presence from Joseph's story?

## **Focus Thought:**

Like Joseph, we are under a lot of cultural pressures to make decisions this time of year that might just not be line with God's plans. Christmas is a time in which we try to juggle our earthly celebration with our heavenly one, and oftentimes Jesus gets put in the backseat to consumerism and spending. Culture tells us that this spending is important; that the amount of love we have for one another is tied directly to the amount of money that we are willing to spend on them. We are told that good Christmas memories and important family time

have everything to do with the amount and quality of the gifts we give. Our children are inundated with advertisements for things that promise a happiness that is rarely fulfilled in the way it says.

And during this time of year, it is perfectly acceptable and justifiable if we do spend our holiday seasons in this way, rushing around, maxing out our credit cards, spending a maddening amount of time in the stores in order to create the perfect holiday season.

And yet, the story of Christmas that our culture tells us is not the same story that God tells us.

Whose birthday is it? It's Jesus' birthday.

**Big Idea:** During this season, we give a lot of our presence to presents. We spend our physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual presence on things that are not ultimately life-giving, so by the time we are able to be a part of the things that really matter, our reserve of presence is fairly depleted. We don't have the energy to spend with other people, let alone with Christ, the center of this season.

***By spending less of our presence on presents, we are freer to be present to God.***

**Application:** The theme for this second Sunday of the Advent Conspiracy is "Spend Less." This morning, we're going to suggest, even though many of you may have already finished your Christmas purchases, to buy one less gift this year: just one. Take the money that

you would have spent on that gift and give it to something truly life giving. On December 18<sup>th</sup>, we will be collecting the Harvest offering. This is our opportunity, as a congregation, to offer up our best to God. This is our time to sacrifice a bit of ourselves in order to show Christ's love to others. This year, we are doing something special with the harvest offering: we have chosen three different ministries that the money will go to based on age groups. For the children, all of the money raised will go towards buying rabbits and goats to help feed people in Palestine and Kenya. For the Junior and Senior High, all of the money raised will go towards helping fund AIDS education in Uganda. And for the Adults, all of the money raised will help towards the MCC water project in East Africa.

Now, here's the catch in all of this. We're asking you to give up buying one gift, one extra, unnecessary gift, and to use **that extra money** to give. It would be very easy for us to simply just add the harvest offering to all of the money we're already spending on Christmas, but this misses the point. Without the sacrifice, the reward is not nearly as sweet. Without the sacrifice, we will just be over committing ourselves, and we will be no more closer to being present to Jesus than before the Advent Conspiracy began.

Realize, this is a total paradigm shift from how the world tells us that Christmas should be. But we don't serve the world, we serve God.

**Conclusion:**

Advent is all about waiting; waiting for Christ to come as an infant to save to world, and waiting for Christ to return a savior to redeem the world back to God.

As Christ followers, we have the responsibility of sharing the abundance of grace and love that Jesus has given to us with others, so that when he does return, we will have actively been a part of leading others to true life and salvation. The problem is we're so happy with what we've been given that we don't want to share. In his book "Crazy Love," Francis Chan talks about our tendency to hoard the blessings that God has given to us. He says:

*Remember the story where Jesus fed thousands of people with one boy's small lunch? In that story, according to Matthew, Jesus gave the loaves to His disciples and then the disciples passed them out to the crowd. Imagine if the disciples had simply held onto the food Jesus gave them, continually thanking Him for providing lunch for them. That would've been stupid when there was enough food to feed the thousands who were gathered and hungry.*

*But that is exactly what we do when we fail to give freely and joyfully. We are loaded down with too many good things, more than we could ever need, while others are desperate for a small loaf. The good things we cling to are more than money; we hoard our resources, our gifts, our time, our families, our friends. As we begin to practice regular giving, we see how ludicrous it is to hold on to the abundance God has given us and merely repeat the words **thank you**.*

Paul assures us though, that in giving of our abundance to others, God will continue to make sure that our needs are met too.

### **2 Corinthians 8:13-15**

*Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*

***Together, let's spend less this season. By spending less of our presence on presents, we are freer to be present to God and to experience Christmas in a fulfilling, life-giving way.***