

Keys to Christmas Joy

The World: Holiday Stuffing

by Carolyn Mahaney

I've been thinking a lot about worldliness lately. Maybe that's because my husband is presently immersed in editing and contributing two chapters to a book on this topic (which of course I get to read while it's being written). Or possibly it's because Chad is writing a paper on this subject for his Bible class at school (which of course I get to help with).

All this thinking about worldliness has led to a fresh realization: I don't think often enough about worldliness.

I assume worldliness doesn't apply to me. I take for granted that I'm not lured by things of the world. I'm above that temptation.

Wrong!

I may not be tempted to dress immodestly or to watch ungodly movies, but I am tempted by other things that spoil my hunger for God.

Take the Christmas season, for instance. Every holiday I can be drawn to all things Christmassy--the shopping, buying gifts, wrapping presents, decorating the tree, baking holiday treats, attending parties and celebrations. Of course these things are not wrong in and of themselves. They can be delightful gifts from God. But I can be tempted to desire them more than the most important thing--regardless of the season: sitting at the Lord's feet (Luke 10:38-41). And then I wonder why my heart feels so dull come December 26th.

John Piper provides the explanation when he says:

"If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation for the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great"
(John Piper, *A Hunger for God*, p. 23)

This holiday I don't want my soul stuffed only with decorations, shopping, and Christmas cookies. I want to make every effort to drink deeply of God's presence so my soul will be truly satisfied.

The World: Holiday Stuffing

by Janelle Bradshaw

So now my mom's got me thinking about worldliness. The fact is, that we are most in danger of worldliness when things are going well. Christmas can be a time of particular temptation because it is a time of particular prosperity. Family and friends are gathering. School is out. There are cards and gifts. And don't forget Christmas dinner! For many of us, prosperity abounds in this season. And worldliness easily goes undetected.

Where is worldliness? you ask. It is there when I prioritize holiday activities over my time with the Lord. Or when I look to the superficial joys of this season for happiness rather than the truth of God's Word.

Mr. Spurgeon warns us to beware of worldliness in prosperity:

"But another testing moment is prosperity. Oh! there have been some of God's people, who have been more tried by prosperity than by adversity. Of the two trials, the trial of adversity is less severe to the spiritual man than that of prosperity. It is a terrible thing to be prosperous. You had need to pray to God, not only to help you in your troubles, but to help you in your blessings. Mr. Whitfield once [requested prayer] for a young man who had-- stop, you will think it was for a young man who had lost his father or his property. No! 'The prayers of the congregation are desired for a young man who has become heir to an immense fortune, and who feels he has need of much grace to keep him humble in the midst of riches.' That is the kind of prayer that ought to be put up; for prosperity is a hard thing to bear."

So let's pray this for ourselves and our loved ones: that God would "help us in our blessings." That He would give us "much grace to keep us humble in the midst of riches" this Christmas.

The World: Joy Robber

by Nicole Whitacre

You guessed it: I too have been thinking about worldliness. As we've told you before, *girltalk* flows out of an ongoing conversation between us four girls, our spouses, and each other. For me, in addition to helping my dad with edits to his book, my husband is doing a series on "worldliness" at our church's youth meetings. So I'm talking about it to one family member or another almost every day.

This is not a morbid, legalistic, judgmental conversation. It is sober, to be sure, and we are all grateful for the reminder to freshly examine our hearts and lives. The ultimate goal, though, as Mom and Janelle have been saying, is to root out whatever is keeping us from enjoying God.

So, although "worldliness" is not usual Christmastime fare on the blogosphere, our aim is not to be a virtual Grinch and rob you of this season's joys. The actual "Grinch Who Stole Christmas" is often the sin of worldliness. It's at the root of much of the anxiety, unhappiness, bickering, discontent and strife that permeate what should be a joyous time.

That's why we want to spend next week talking about practical ways we can resist worldliness. Not because we want to clamp down on Christmas celebrations. Rather, we want all of us to revel in the joy that Christ has come to rescue a dying world.

Keys to Christmas Joy

by Nicole Whitacre

What would make you happy this Christmas?

What if I told you that you won a contest and someone was going to do all your holiday cooking, cleaning, decorating, shopping and wrapping? What if I promised you would get the present of your dreams (like that car with the bow on top in the commercial)? Or what if I predicted that family rifts would be mended, or that this year's Christmas memories would be the best ever?

The fact is, all these things (if they actually happened) might bring us a measure of temporary happiness. But they wouldn't sustain us through a year's worth of hardship and trouble. We know this. Yet every year, we place a losing bet on the world to supply a truly joyful holiday season.

But what if I told you that you could have a joyful Christmas, guaranteed? And what's more, that you could experience that joy year-round? And what if I wasn't kidding this time?

This week we're going to offer five keys to joy this holiday season. No, we aren't going to do your Christmas shopping for you. But we hope these thoughts will serve you more than that.

The first key to a joyful Christmas? Contemplate the incarnation.

Consider the staggeringly glorious news *that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons"* (Galatians 4:4-5). Ponder this truth every day for the next twenty-two days, and you won't be disappointed the day after Christmas.

Here are two simple ways to contemplate the wonder of God become man this season:

Read Chapter Five, "God Incarnate" from JI Packer's classic *Knowing God*. I've taken to reading this chapter every Christmas, and it never fails to help redirect my gaze from worldly pleasures to eternal truth. As Dr. Packer writes:

"The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity—hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory—because at the Father's will Jesus Christ became poor and was born in a stable so that thirty years later he might hang on a cross. It is the most wonderful message that the world has ever heard, or will hear."

Purchase and listen to the Sovereign Grace Christmas album, *Savior: Celebrating the Mystery of God Become Man*. While not traditional Christmas tunes, these beautiful songs are full of the wonderful truths of the incarnation:

God has sent His greatest treasure
Shown His love in greatest measure
Sending Christ to bleed and suffer
Purchasing our joy forever
Let the earth rejoice!

Instead of looking to the world to give us joy this Christmas, let's focus on the one who came to earth and bore our sins, purchasing our joy forever!

That Second Key to Joy

by Janelle Bradshaw

I'm chiming in today to talk about another key for maintaining our Christmas joy, and keeping it all year 'round.

The second key is to consistently practice the spiritual disciplines.

Christmas time is busy and there is always lots to do. It can be a temptation to let a few things slide. You know the thoughts: "Things will settle down after the holidays. I'll get back to it then." Often times, the spiritual disciplines can be the first to go.

We usually don't feel the immediate effect of skipping a few devotional times here and there. But, what happens if we don't get our presents wrapped in time or the cookies made before the big meal? That would be a disaster!

Ah, but the neglect of the spiritual disciplines will have greater consequences. Over time, our heart will begin to grow cold to the things of the Lord. And no amount of Christmas cheer will provide the fix.

But if we give priority to our time in God's Word and to prayer, we will find renewed joy each morning. Joy that sticks in the midst of Christmas craziness. For as the Psalmist says:

"The precepts of the Lord are right, *giving joy to the heart...*they are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb." Psalm 19:8,10 (emphasis mine)

So as things get busy, let's make sure to keep the spiritual disciplines at the top of our Christmas to do list, and experience true holiday cheer.

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.*

Key Number Three for Christmas Joy

by Kristin Chesemore

It's that "most wonderful time of the year!" I try to start enjoying the festivities of Christmas as early as I possibly can. Christmas music began playing in our home even before Thanksgiving (My mom is a firm believer in waiting until the day after Thanksgiving, but I personally like to enjoy the Christmas holiday as long as possible!). It's only the 5th of December, but we've already purchased and decorated our tree, hung the stockings, and bought presents for the kiddos. This week we'll make cookies, attend Christmas parties, and take a drive to see the neighborhood Christmas lights.

These are all blessings from the Lord to enjoy.

Funny though, how quickly these Christmas traditions become all about me. And selfishness (seeking to satisfy myself with the things of this world) is a one-way ticket to a lack of joy.

That's why the third key to Christmas joy (and fighting worldliness) is to serve and give to others.

After all, isn't this season ultimately about the Savior who came to seek and save the lost? Isn't it supposed to—in addition to reminding me to be grateful for the gospel—also remind me to follow my Lord's example and sacrifice for and serve others?

JI Packer, in his chapter on the incarnation Nicole mentioned the other day, exhorts me to put aside my selfish tendencies:

"The Christmas spirit does not shine out in the Christian snob. For the Christmas spirit is the spirit of those who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor-- spending and being spent--to enrich their fellow humans, giving time, trouble, care and concern, to do good to others---and not just their own friends--in whatever way there seems need."

I would like this Christmas season to be characterized by a renewed desire to be outwardly focused instead of selfish. JI Packer continues:

"If God in mercy revives us, one of the things he will do will be to work more of this spirit in our hearts and lives. If we desire spiritual quickening for ourselves individually, one step we should take is to

seek to cultivate this spirit. *'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty became rich'* (2 Cor. 8:9).”

So will you join me in praying that God would work more of His spirit in our hearts? Then let's take time to look around. Who can we serve? Who in our family can we bless? Who in our church can we sacrifice for? How can we care and give to those in need this holiday season?

Let's enjoy the festivities, but not stop there—let's chase after the pure joy of serving others this Christmas!

Key Four for More Joy

by Carolyn Mahaney

Serving with communion is the fourth key to joy. All too often, I spend time with the Lord, reading His Word and praying, but then I rush into my day, trying to serve others, but neglect to continue to commune with God.

And soon my joy dissipates.

You know what it is like. We can be busy doing all the shopping, wrapping, decorating and baking that make for a happy Christmas, but we can be anxious, overwhelmed and irritated in the process. We're still focused on worldliness instead of godliness.

As Kristin exhorted us yesterday, serving is a vital to fighting selfishness and holding on to joy this holiday season. But if we try to serve without relying on God's strength, without meditating on His Word, without offering up prayers to Him, we'll still be lacking joy.

Think of Martha in the Bible. I don't need to tell you her story again (Luke 10:38-42). But needless to say we can all turn into Marthas around Christmastime. All service and no joy. Our Lord did not rebuke Martha for serving. He rebuked her for failing to choose the best thing (as her sister Mary had done) and sit at His feet and listen to Him.

As J.I. Packer (we're using him a lot this week!) has observed: “Meditation is a lost art today, and Christian people suffer grievously from their ignorance of the practice.”

Martha certainly experienced the consequences of not communing with the Savior. But we don't have to “suffer grievously” this holiday season. We

don't even have to be anxious or overwhelmed. By meditating on God's Word throughout the day, joy can be ours, even amidst the chaos.

One practice that has helped me to meditate and pray is to write one verse or quote from my devotions on a 3x5 card and carry it around with me throughout the day. This way, God's grace and truth is with me right at the moments when I need it most.

You may have a method that works better for you. But whatever your practice: by meditating on God's Word throughout the day, we can experience joy that will last from morning coffee till we lay our heads on the pillow at night.

The Fifth and Final Key to Joy

by Janelle Bradshaw

As we've been saying all week long, Christmas is full of wonderful gifts. And not just the ones residing underneath the tree. We experience gifts of family and friends. Gifts of food and fellowship. As my dad would say, "We are rich!"

And yet, I can sometimes fly through this season, taking for granted all that I have been given. This worldly mentality can rob me of joy if I fail to recognize and appreciate every good gift as coming straight from my heavenly Father (James 1:17). This leads me to our fifth and final key to joy this Christmas: "turn every gift into an opportunity to glorify and adore God."

Each year at the outset of vacation, my dad is faithful to remind us to transfer glory to God for His many gifts. He reads us the following quote from C.S. Lewis:

"Pleasures are shafts of glory as it strikes our sensibility....I have tried...to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration. I don't mean simply by giving thanks for it. One must of course give thanks, but I meant something different...Gratitude exclaims, very properly, 'How good of God to give me this.' Adoration says, 'What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!' One's mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun....If this is Hedonism, it is also a somewhat arduous discipline. But it is worth some labour." (as quoted in, *When I Don't Desire God*, by John Piper)

This discipline is worth some labor. If, when we receive a gift, we stop and allow our minds to “run back up the sunbeam to the sun,” if we adore the One from whom all gifts come, we will find our joy multiplied a hundred fold.

Comfort at Christmastime

by Carolyn Mahaney

As we wrote about joy last week, we were also mindful that there are many people who experience grief and sadness during the Christmas season. My sister-in-law Sharon is one of them. Today we want to reprint some thoughts she shared with us several years ago. Here is how I first introduced Sharon to the girltalk audience:

On July 8, 2003 Sharon lost Dave, her husband of 32 years, to a brain tumor. We all desperately miss Dave's joy, his impeccable sense of humor, his servant's heart, and his delicious cooking. However, the intense grief that Sharon and her five children have experienced these past two and a half years is a testimony to the love they had for Dave, and his love for them

And yet, through this unimaginable hardship, Sharon's faith in God's sovereignty, wisdom, and goodness has remained strong. She has truly grieved with hope. While not a day goes by that she does not desperately miss “Her Bud” (as she and Dave would call each other) she displays a selfless strength in serving others that only comes from knowing Jesus Christ.

For this reason, we asked Sharon to share about both the pain, but more importantly the comfort she experiences at Christmastime. We pray her thoughts will provide hope to those of you who have lost a loved one. And for the rest of us, may we extend discerning care to those we know who are grieving this Christmas.

I believe there is only one answer to the question of how I experience God's comfort at Christmastime, and that is for me to be on my knees basking in and staying grounded in the Word of God. His words touch my heart and soul, as he is the ultimate comforter. And from him come all other forms of comfort, as well.

Of course, snags are everywhere this time of year. If you've ever driven through the mountains, you've probably seen signs that read, “Beware of falling rocks.” For me as a widow, the holidays can be full

of “falling rocks” in the form of that invitation or Christmas card addressed to only one name, traditions that are no longer an option, having to pass by the men’s department no longer looking for that annual sweater or tie, or even getting a whiff of my husband’s favorite cologne in the crowds of shoppers. Like a thorn on a rose pricks the finger, these reminders of a love lost prick my fragile, already bleeding heart. The challenge becomes surfacing from the pain of the past and wanting to live joyfully in the present with a hope for the future.

Although I have yet to get through the season without heartache and tears, and this will be my third Christmas without my husband, my Lord is faithful to supply the needed comfort. I should add here that I must choose to be comforted, as the temptation can be to fall into the sin of self-pity. If you are a widow, you know you can feel the pain of loneliness even when you’re in a group—even a group of family and friends. Those who help me to surface from the pain are not afraid of my sudden tears that may spill over in an instant unexpectedly, as they realize that may be the only language I can speak at the moment. They respect my need to talk at length about my current grief, or my desire not to talk at all. They give me much-appreciated hugs and tell me they care. They sometimes share remembrances of my husband that make me smile through the tears, knowing the memories may cause pain but are certainly treasured. Comfort has also come in the form of e-mails and phone calls and cards, all with words of love and encouragement. This past Sunday, I was comforted by a word shared during worship from one of the pastors with an encouragement for widows and single parents.

I think it is important to note here that we should not assume someone is no longer grieving, or not grieving as much, because a number of years have passed. I am among those who, before I became a widow, mistakenly thought that the one-year anniversary marked the end of the grieving process, that somehow things became easier and got back to “normal.” Where did that idea come from? That’s not accurate. I believe grieving is actually a gift, a good and necessary gift, a process, and a journey that, because of the depth of our love, may last until I see my Bud again. And, yes, the severity of my grieving is increased during the holidays. But as I respond to the pain and embrace with gratefulness the comforts he sends, I learn endurance and perseverance; and I realize that everything is part of the process of sanctification. And I am overwhelmed—not by my grief—but by his love for me.

Comfort at Christmastime

by Nicole Whitacre

I know many people who are suffering this Christmas. Their trials weigh upon my heart as I cut fresh holly for the mantle and bake cookies with the kids. All the Christmas gaiety—“Have a happy jolly Christmas, the best time of the year...”—feels as out of place as a circus act at a funeral home.

For Christians though, Christmas is never out of place. Sure, the trappings of the holiday may be more painful than pleasant some years. But Christmas for the Christian can be a welcome reminder of our certain hope, a celebration of promises kept by God.

In *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus: Experiencing the Peace and Promise of Christmas*, compiled by Nancy Guthrie, Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains:

“What God did when he sent his Son into the world is an absolute guarantee that he will do everything he has ever promised to do. Look at it in a personal sense: “All things work together for good to them that love God”—that is a promise—“to them who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28, KJV). “But how can I know that is true for me?” asks someone. The answer is the incarnation. God has given the final proof that all his promises are sure, that he is faithful to everything he has ever said. So that promise is sure for you. Whatever your state or condition may be, whatever may happen to you, he has said, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb. 13:5, KJV)—and he will not. He has said so, and we have absolute proof that he fulfills his promises. He does not always do it immediately in the way that we think. No, no! But he does it! And he will never fail to do it.”

Whatever your state or condition this Christmas, whatever your future may hold, God’s promises are certain. He kept His promise to send His Son and He will keep His promises to you—to be with you in trial and to deliver you. When Christmas reminds us that God keeps His promises it truly can be “the best time of the year.”

*“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted” (Isaiah 49:15).**

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