

December 13, 2009 by Steve Brandon



Jesus Is Better Than Christmas Traditions (part 1)

(Various)

In our exposition of the book of Hebrews, we have come to the precipice of a major section of the book. In the book of Hebrews, there are five warning sections. Each of them are filled with exhortations to press on by faith. We have come to Hebrews 3:7, which begins the second warning passage of the book. This warning continues until chapter 4, verse 13.

With only two Sunday mornings remaining until Christmas, I really don't want to interrupt the flow of the warning in the book of Hebrews. So, this morning, I will deviate from our exposition of Hebrews to preach a topical message on Christmas. In the spirit of the book of Hebrews, my message is entitled, "Jesus is Better than Christmas Traditions."

Christmas is filled with traditions of all sorts. We can name some of them. There are Christmas cards. There are Christmas carols. There are Christmas trees. There are advent candles, advent wreaths, advent calendars. There are decorations and candy and cookies. There are poinsettias, lights, snow, Christmas movies, mistletoes, nativity scenes and presents. There is the shopping frenzy. There are the chestnuts roasting on the open fire. There are family gatherings.

Now, some of these traditions are good and helpful. Certainly, there are some Christmas carols that are very Christ-exalting.

"O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel."
(This is a cry for the Messiah to come!)

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King."
(This is the joy of the Messiah coming!)

"O Come, let us adore Him!
O Come, let us adore Him!
O Come, let us adore Him! Christ, the Lord!"
(This is the result of the Messiah coming!)

Other helpful things about Christmas tradition include a nativity scene. It can help us think about the reality of Jesus being born in a stable (although not everything was quite like most scenes have it). Family gathering are often an opportunity for great joy and renewing important family relationships. Presents can be helpful, as they are expressions of kindness to one another. Furthermore, gifts help to remind us of the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ.

Now, there are some traditions that are just plain silly, like the story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Santa is up on the north pole, preparing presents to distribute all around the world. But, on one particular Christmas Eve, it was snowy; he could never deliver all of the presents in such a blizzard. But, along comes this reindeer, who was mocked by his reindeer friends for his nose that shined bright red. But, Santa used him that night to lead the team of reindeer so that he could deliver all of the presents to all the children in the world. Now, this reindeer is esteemed by his friends! His story goes down in history! That's pretty silly.

Let's take another one. Today, December 13, is St. Lucia day, which is celebrated in Sweden. It celebrates the life of a young Christian girl, Lucia, who was martyred in 304 A.D. The story told about here is that she would secretly bring food to the persecuted Christians in Rome as they were hiding in the catacombs under the city. According to tradition, she would wear candles on her head so that she would have both hands free to carry things to the hiding Christians. And so, today, across this city and around this world, St. Lucia day is celebrated by a girl dressed in a white dress, with a red sash around her waist, and a crown of candles on her head. To me, it looks a bit silly. A girl dressed in burning candles?

As silly as this may sound to you, I remember celebrating this in our church growing up. I never remember that it was for a martyred girl. Furthermore, it wasn't until this week that I ever realized that it wasn't a Christmas celebration. But, it always comes 12 days before Christmas. And it includes something looking like a Christmas wreath and candles. I don't want to offend the many who celebrate this every year. But, personally, I think that it's a bit silly.

And then, there are the many Christmas carols that are straight out pointless.

Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells, Jingle all the way.
Oh what fun it is to right in a one horse open sleigh, hey!

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

Jack frost nipping at your nose.
Yuletide carols being sung by the fire.
Folks dressed up as Eskimos.

Now, has anyone ever had chestnuts roasting on an open fire? And who really likes "Jack Frost" nipping at your nose? What's a "yuletide carol"? And how does an Eskimo dress?

Frosty the snowman was a jolly happy soul,
With a corncob pipe and a button nose,
And two eyes made out of coal.
Frosty the snowman is a fairy tale, they say,
He was made of snow but the children
know how he came to life one day.
There must have been some magic in that
Old silk hat they found.
For when they placed it on his head,
He began to dance around.

I saw three ships come sailing by
on Christmas Day, on Christmas Day.
I saw three ships come sailing by
on Christmas Day in the morning.

So, this Christmas season, I want for us to think about our Christmas traditions. Now, I'm not seeking to squash all Christmas traditions. It's OK to be happy when riding on a "one horse open sleigh" if you've ever ridden in one! It's OK to sing about it. It's fine to sing a song about a magical snowman or a special reindeer. It's fine to sing about ships on Christmas day. And it's OK to have fun in these ways, just as much as it is OK to have fun at a theme park. But, please realize that these types of things have nothing to do with Jesus. They have nothing to do with the reason for the season.

Oh, they come with the season. And they may give you some fun and enjoyment. That's fine. In this way, they are like a bowl of popcorn or some Looney Tunes video. You can enjoy it. It's not wrong. But, it doesn't have any spiritual value.

My aim this morning, however, isn't upon the Christ-less Christmas traditions. Rather, I'm addressing those Christmas traditions that have some spiritual value in that they are able to point us to Christ. There is much good in many of the traditions of Christmas. And I'm not encouraging you this morning to abandon them in any way. How thankful we ought to be that we live in a nation where the default culture is Christianity!

Our family attended a concert last night. It was a secular symphony concert. But, at the end, we sang a bunch of traditional Christmas carols. They weren't the trivial sorts; they were the real deal. We sang "Joy To The World", "The First Noel", "It Came Upon A Midnight Clear", "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen", "O Little Town of Bethlehem", "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", and "O Come All Ye Faithful." Near the end, we also sang "Silent Night". For this song, there was a misprint in our programs, and the words were not provided. But, it didn't matter; everyone stood and sang anyway! People knew the songs, and sang the words. How thankful we ought to be! The finale of the night was the Hallelujah Chorus! It was a great time, pointing people to Christ.

But, know this: Christmas traditions are helpful only to the extent that they point us to Jesus. Because, Jesus is better than the Christmas traditions. Let's not abandon our traditions. My point this morning is this: "Let's redeem the them." Let's redeem our Christmas traditions. Let's use them to point us to Christ. Jesus is better than the Christmas traditions!

Open in your Bibles to Colossians, chapter 1. As many of you know, the book of Colossians is one of the greatest books in the Bible directing us to Christ. In this book, Paul constantly puts forth what Christ had done for us. So, let's begin in verse 13, ...

Colossians 1:13-18

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

When Jesus came into the flesh, He accomplished some things for us. Verse 13 tells us that Jesus rescued us from the domain of darkness. We were once in darkness, awaiting the judgment to come. But Jesus, through His death brought us into light. Verse 13 also tells us that Jesus transferred us into His kingdom. We were once in the kingdom of Satan. But, Jesus transferred us into His kingdom. We read of how Jesus redeemed us and has forgiven us our sins (verse 14). We were due punishment in hell, but Jesus bought us back. He released us from our sins, so that we might no longer face the judgment of God.

Should you spend any time thinking about these realities, you will realize how kind Jesus was to us. We were helpless and hopeless, but Jesus helped us and gave us hope. Jesus brought us near to Him. Jesus restored us to the Father. He broke down all dividing walls between us and God. Jesus restored us to the Father. And now, we can have perfect fellowship with Him!

Jesus is described in verses 15-18 of Colossians. He is the image of God (verse 15). He is the highest of all creation (verse 15). He, Himself, created the world (verse 16). The entire created order is for Him (verse 16). He is the sustainer of all things (verse 17). He is the head of the church (verse 17). And then, the phrase that I want you to look at is the last half of verse 18, "So that He Himself will come to have first place in everything."

The coming of Jesus into the flesh was for a purpose. He came to die, that He might rise, that He might have first place in everything. He is to have first place in our church. He is to have first place in our homes. He is to have first place in our attitudes. He is to have first place in our time. He is to have first place in our relationships. And, this morning I am emphasizing the fact that He is to have first place in our Christmas traditions.

There is something about traditions that can easily pull us away from the reality that they represent. For instance, turn over to Colossians 2. Look there at verse 8, ...

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

In this verse, Paul points out the danger of man's tradition. It can take you captive. It can carry you away in deception. Whenever you focus upon the tradition of men, you can easily miss the glories of Christ. Isn't this true? John MacArthur tells the story:

A wealthy Boston family had a christening party for their new baby. They invited all their friends and relatives to their magnificent home to celebrate the birth of their precious infant. A half hour into the party, when it was time to bring the baby out for everyone to see the mother made a tragic discovery. The large bed where she had left the baby asleep was piled high with the coats of the guests. The baby was lying dead underneath the mound suffocated by the carelessly discarded wraps. [\[1\]](#)

So focused were they on the celebration, that they missed the entire reason for the celebration! In fact, they smothered and killed the whole reason for the party! And Christmas traditions can do this to us. There are cards and concerts and craft shows. There are parties to attend and programs to watch and presents to buy. There are movies and music and munchies. There are trees and treats and travels. There are photos and food and frenzy.

What does the Christmas frenzy do for us? It doesn't do much. In fact, in many ways, it is anti-Christmas. It is harmful to us. Jesus is the prince of peace (Is. 9:6). When Jesus was born, it was the angels who said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." Does this describe the Christmas frenzy? Or does it describe peace and joy? And yet, what does the Christmas frenzy do? There's no peace. There is no joy. God is not glorified.

I read one email this week that said this: "This time of the year is so busy. At times I hate it. I'm ordering most of my presents on line. I just can't shop with the kids and drag them everywhere. But there are some things I can't get online, and I dread going out."

This is nothing new to any of us. We feel obligated to attend the various parties we are invited to. We feel the stress to decorate our homes. We feel the pressure to purchase gifts. We are frustrated by not being able to find the right one. We are frazzled by the crowds. And so, what's the result? We complain. We worry. We are impatient in the shopping line. We express our frustration to others. We overspend. We place our priorities in the wrong place. Can all of this be good?

All of these attitudes are contrary to what God calls us to be and to do. Scripture tells us to "Do all things without grumbling or disputing" (Philippians 2:14-15). "Be anxious for nothing" (Philippians 4:6). "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

A few weeks ago, I mentioned the story of Mary and Martha, recorded in Luke chapter 10. They were sisters. Jesus had come to their home and was teaching a small gathering of people there. Martha was caught up in the frenzy. She was "worried and bothered about so many things" (Luke 10:41). But, Mary chose the good part (Luke 10:42), sitting and listening to Jesus. Such a story has much to teach us about Christmas. We can so focus on all of the activities of Christmas, that we neglect the substance.

Returning to our text here in Colossians, chapter 2, I do not believe that it is an accident that surrounding verse 8 (both before and after), Paul centers us upon the centrality of Christ. Look at verse 6, ...

Colossians 2:6-7

Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

In other words, think back to the way that you received Christ Jesus the Lord. It was by faith in Him. It was by trusting in His work upon the cross. In that same way, live your life. Live your life by faith, trusting in Jesus. Don't be carried away by the traditions of men (verse 8). Because, as verse 9 says, ...

Colossians 2:9

For in [Jesus] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,

Verse 9 is Christmas. It is Jesus, the man, having the fullness of Deity dwelling in Him. This is the Immanuel - God with us! And the great reality comes in verse 10. It's not merely that Jesus has come and lived among us. That's good and in that we rejoice. But, the great reality of our lives is that ...

Colossians 2:10

in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

We are complete in Jesus. The traditions of men cannot make us complete. We are complete in Jesus. It is the great reality of our faith that the one who rules over all is the one who has come to us and sanctified us. He has perfected us! There is nothing more that needs to be done for our soul. We are complete in Him. Why would we celebrate any other thing? Jesus is Better than our Christmas traditions.

Now, when we come to the idea of celebrating Christmas, there is really very little in the Bible that discusses it directly. Matthew and Luke tell us of the circumstances behind the birth of Christ. There are a few Old Testament prophecies anticipating the birth of Jesus. There are a few verses in the New Testament that deal with the realities of the incarnation. But, overall, there isn't much to instruct us regarding any celebration of Christmas.

This has led some, like the Puritans, to stay away from Christmas celebrations altogether. Nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to celebrate Christmas. Furthermore, the Puritans saw "Christmas" as the "Christ Mass," which of course, was too Catholic for them. In general, they ignored Christmas. On Sunday morning, they would have continued on with their Biblical exposition, ignoring the Christmas topic.

Some, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, forbid the celebration of Christmas. They don't find such a celebration in the Bible. They believe that the traditions we have all have pagan roots. Therefore, they should be avoided.

But, I say there is nothing wrong with having such traditions. When God established Israel, He gave them feasts and festivals to celebrate. There was Passover. There was Pentecost. There was the Feast of Tabernacles. There was the Day of Atonement. All of these feasts and festivals were set up for the worship and honoring of the Lord.

Each of the feasts were given to Israel for a purpose of reminding them of the ways of God. The Passover reminded the Israelites of the way in which God redeemed them out of slavery. The day of Pentecost was like our thanksgiving. It was a celebration of the harvest. The feast of Tabernacles was to remind Israel of the days of wandering in the desert for their unbelief. The Day of Atonement was given to remind Israel of their sin. They needed atonement for their sins. God demanded that an animal be sacrificed for the sins of the people.

Christmas can function in these ways as well. Christmas is a time that can focus our attention upon the realities of our faith. What makes Christianity entirely unique among the religions of the world is that we believe that God has come to us and has visited us. We believe that the birth of Jesus was a miraculous birth. Jesus was born of a virgin in Bethlehem, according to the prophesies of the Scripture. Christmas teaches us of the coming of God to save us. It forces us to think about Jesus, the God-man, who came to redeem us from our sin.

There are so many things about Christmas that points us to Jesus. Our songs point us to Jesus. Our gifts point us to Jesus. The lights and the candles show us that Jesus is the light of the world. The nativity scenes point us to Jesus. The stars on our Christmas trees remind us of the star that guided the wise men. The angels remind us of the angels who initially announced the good news to the shepherds in the fields. And there is so much good.

Now, those who object to the celebration of Jesus point out such a celebration is nowhere contained in the Scripture. I agree that it is nowhere commanded in Scripture. But, that doesn't mean that we cannot engage in such a celebration. Did you realize that there are other feasts that the nation of Israel celebrated that are nowhere in the Scripture? There was Purim, the Feast of Esther, which commemorates the sovereignty of God in preserving His people. There was the New Year's Day, which celebrates the forming of the nation of Israel. There was Hanukkah, the Feast of Lights, which celebrates the rededication of the temple after the military victories of Israel led by Judas Maccabaeus. Jesus, Himself, celebrated Hanukkah (John 10:22-39). And He used it in a way that He might point to Himself.

And in the same way, we can use Christmas to point to Jesus. In doing so, I believe that God is pleased. But, the purpose of my message this morning is to remind you of the danger. Consider the following text (which could easily be addressing America):

Isaiah 1:10

Hear the word of the LORD,
You rulers of Sodom;
Give ear to the instruction of our God,
You people of Gomorrah.

These aren't complements. Though the LORD was addressing the people of God, He was addressing them as sinful people.

Isaiah 1:11

"What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD.
"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
And the fat of fed cattle;
And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.

At this point, you really need to pause and think about what's being said. Didn't God command sacrifices? Didn't God command offerings? Didn't God specify that sacrifices should be bulls and lambs and goats? And yet, God says boldly that he has "no pleasure" in them. Even though they are multiplied, God still has no pleasure. Such may be true of our Christmas celebrations as well.

Isaiah 1:12
When you come to appear before Me,
Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?

God puts the picture of the Israelites coming to worship Him in the tabernacle. But, rather than focusing upon the praise they offer to the LORD, God focuses upon their dirty feet that they bring into the tabernacle. He says, "You are merely messing up my house." Rather than viewing these worshiper as invited guests into His house, He is viewing them as kids with messy shoes who have come to ransack His house. And then comes the startling request:

Isaiah 1:13
Bring your worthless offerings no longer,
Incense is an abomination to Me
New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies--
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.

God says, "Don't bring me any offerings any longer." He called them worthless. He called them worse than worthless. He called them an "abomination." Didn't God command such things? Yes. But, still it's an abomination to Him. The same is true of the solemn assemblies at the new moon and Sabbath day. He commanded that all of this celebration take place. And yet, God said, "I cannot endure them." Why? The key comes at the end of the verse. Because iniquity is on the hands of the people. God cannot endure rulers of Sodom and rulers of Gomorrah coming to worship, even if they are doing everything commanded. The sin is too great for Him to bear. Hearts of wickedness are too much for God to take. "So, stop! Don't dirty my house any longer! Just stay at home!"

Isaiah 1:14
I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,
They have become a burden to Me;
I am weary of bearing them.

Why did God hate such festivals and feasts? Why did they become such a burden to the LORD? Because they weren't repentant over their sins (Isaiah 1:16). The premise of the sacrifices were for those who were sorry for their sins. Apart from this, the LORD is weary of bearing our religious activity. This is what we see in the next verse.

Isaiah 1:15
So when you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood."

Israel was celebrating the feasts that God had commanded. And yet, God was not pleased. Even though God did command sacrifices, He did not take pleasure in what the Israelites were doing. He calls their offerings "worthless." The wicked hearts of the Israelites were displeasing to God, and so their sacrifices were displeasing.

At the end of the day, I don't believe that God is so concerned about which holidays we celebrate, as much as our heart in celebrating them. Now, certainly, if our celebrations were contrary to the truth, He would be concerned. God is pleased when we worship Him with our whole hearts and our whole minds, sanctified by the blood of Christ. Our traditions can be redeemed.

Here is the call to how we can celebrate our Christmas feasts.

Isaiah 1:16-17
Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight
Cease to do evil, learn to do good;
Seek justice, reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

In other words, walk in righteousness; come before Him with clean hands and a pure heart! Do right. Help others. And now, comes the great invitation.

Isaiah 1:18
"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD,
"Though your sins are as scarlet,
They will be as white as snow;

Though they are red like crimson,
They will be like wool."

Of course, we know that this comes from Christ. It's where we need to direct our hearts this Christmas season. The condition here is this, ...

Isaiah 1:19-20

"If you consent and obey,
You will eat the best of the land;
But if you refuse and rebel,
You will be devoured by the sword"
Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

What direction are you going? Are you going toward the Lord? Are you consenting, affirming Him and obeying Him? Or are you refusing and rebelling? Those have two different outcomes. The one washes white as snow; the other means you will be devoured by the sword. I think it all has to do with how Christmas comes and how our hearts respond. Our traditions can be redeemed if we focus our minds on Jesus and seek to point to Him in all of our traditions. The saying is quaint: "Jesus is the reason for the season." But, that is the flow of my message, that we may realize that Jesus is truly better than anything and we should focus on Him.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 13, 2009 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] John MacArthur, *God With Us*.