

“A Gift Not Available in Any Store”

Matthew 1:18-25

The Advent Conspiracy: Give More

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It's the most wonderful time of the year. Maybe. Christmas is also the most stressful. Why? Well just look at your calendar. You take your normally over stuffed schedule and add Christmas cards stuffed with a Christmas letter, hours at the stores and online buying gifts, baking dozens of cookies for the cookie exchange, hosting parties, buying and trimming the tree, decorating the house, stringing up lights, Church events, charity activities, school concerts, the office party, hours spent in traffic, trips to the relatives plus year end reports, final exams and papers, wrapping presents, and staying up until 2 a.m. to put together the three thousand piece millennium falcon. So here are a few time saving tips for Christmas:

- Don't have a hostess gift for a party? Wrap up the fruitcake Aunt Tilly gave you ... in 1997.
- Get your dog to lick the Christmas Envelopes.
- Four words: “Clarence gets his wings.” I just saved you 2 ½ hours.
- No time to buy gifts for the family get together? When no one is near the tree add your name to the tags on the gifts.

With so much to do and so little time, we often get stressed and angry with the people nearest us. It's no wonder we lose control during this most wonderful time of the year.

Maybe we are spending our time on the wrong things. Ask yourself: “What is most memorable about past Christmases?” Often, the answer is not a specific gift. What stands out are the times spent with family and friends. There is one gift not available in any store: Time. In fact, going to the store takes Time away from you. We don't just spend money at Walmart or Amazon, we also spend Time. In this fast forward age, Time is more valuable than money. The Advent Conspiracy is not just about slowing down Christmas consumerism. It's not just about giving to the poor. It's also about slowing down and giving our time to the people in our lives. It's about reconnecting with your family, your friends and your Heavenly Father. It's about taking back your Time and spending it differently. None of us can “make time.” Everyone has the same 24 hour period. We *can* decide how we will spend time. And to spend it wisely, it's best to follow the directions of the One who can “make time,” God - the Creator of time.

First, **Time is God's Gift to you.** We say, “My time is my own,” but every second, minute, day, month and year is actually a gift from God. He has a plan for how to use it. The question is: Are you following God's plan, your plan or someone else's?

Do you know what some say is the most boring chapter of the Bible? The first chapter of the whole New Testament – Matthew 1 – the Genealogy of Jesus – a list of 46 hard to pronounce names – everything from Amminadab to Zerubbabel. You may wonder, “Why did Matthew start off his book with a boring list like this? Why did God make the first chapter of the New Testament a dry, difficult roll call?” It would never make it as a best seller today. Yet Matthew summarizes this family tree with an amazing truth:

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ. Matthew 1:17

All those ancestors fit into God’s perfect plan. Every fourteen generations there is a crucial turning point: the glorious zenith of David’s reign and the shameful depths of the Babylonian captivity. Many of these ancestors lived out their lives not knowing what God is doing. They didn’t know they were a vital link in a chain leading to the Messiah and Savior of the world. Each played a part in God’s greater plan. When Matthew puts it down on paper and steps back he can see the pattern of God’s timeline which the others miss.

God is still working out His plan in our time. You have a choice: to look for His hand in your day and work with Him or pursue whatever path you choose. How do you catch a glimpse of God’s hand? How do you see His Timetable? Do what Matthew did – step back frequently and take it all in. Here is God’s Time Management plan:

- Pray Each Day – Your body works better if you eat balanced healthy meals each day. The Creator of your body designed your spirit to work the same way. Jesus said, “One does not live on bread alone but on every word from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus’ pattern was to start every morning in prayer to His Father (Mark 1:35).
- Seek Each Week – Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for people not people for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath is God’s weekly gift to us. He wants us to rest and refill our tanks, to reconnect with Him through worship and with family, to reflect on the past week and review what’s coming up next week. Seek Him each week by taking a Sabbath. Try to eliminate all the other things packed into your weekend.
- Monitor Each Month – The Jews followed a lunar calendar. Those twenty-eight days gave a rhythm to their lives. Each month had certain tasks, sacrifices and celebrations. Pause once a month to monitor what’s going well and what’s not. It’s best to do this with a spiritual mentor. Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” Growth comes through being honest with and accountable to someone who is farther along the path than you.
- Disappear Each Year – At least once a year get away from it all. Vacation is a modern creation but there are many examples of God’s people withdrawing from work for longer periods. We make the mistake of packing non-stop activities into our vacations making us more exhausted than when we left. When you disappear once a year, make sure to block out some time to rest. Jesus said,

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28-30

You have a whole year ahead of you. Take that new calendar you get from your insurance agent or realtor and write in these dates now. They will allow you to step back and gain God's perspective on what's happening in your time.

Second, **Give the Gift of Time.** When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary God chose her to be the mother of His Son she faced an extremely difficult life changing decision. Yes, she might be shunned and stoned because of her premarital pregnancy. But if she survived it also meant giving her life to raise God's Messiah. Joseph also faced a hard decision. Would he take Mary as his wife, endure public scandal and shield her from any attack? Would he take her home to Bethlehem and even to Egypt to protect the life of this Child? Would he raise this Son as his own? Both of them chose to give the one gift they had: their time on earth. They gave it to God with all their hearts.

Many of the most cherished Christmas gifts were not bought in a store. A good number of the treasures of this season were made by a child, a parent, a spouse or friend. You can certainly make gifts for the ones you love. They will be more cherished than anything from a store. But with only two weeks 'til Christmas I don't want to add another layer of stress on your life. So here is an easier, low cost present: give the gift of time. Give a coupon for babysitting or yard work. Give a certificate to your spouse – one date night a week. Plan a special day with each one of your children. Remember that calendar we were looking at a few minutes ago? Schedule time on it with each significant person in your life.

A man named Bill realized he wasn't spending as much time with his girls. He apologized to them and then, by way of explanation, added, "Actually the quantity of time we spend together is more important than the quantity of time." Kristen age 6 and Madison age 4 didn't quite understand. So Bill explained, "Quantity means how much time and quality means how good the time is we spend together. Which would you rather have?" Not missing a beat, Kristen replied, "Quality time. And a lot of it!"¹

Third, **Take the Time to Restore a Relationship.** Do you know the Christmas story actually starts with divorce proceedings.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Matthew 1:18-19

The life of Mary and her unborn Child depended on Joseph's love and protection. Through an angel God took the time to restore their relationship. The dream was simple and clear.

¹ Pat Ferguson, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” Matthew 1:21-23

This Child will come for one purpose: to restore relationships. He will save us from sin and reconcile us to God. He will bear a title: Immanuel. In Jesus God is with us. God is not far, God is not distant. God comes near. Christmas is a time to restore relationships. What relationship do you need to restore this Christmas? Will you take the time to heal it?

I sympathize with a Pastor named Phil LeMaster. He accepted a call to be senior pastor of a large congregation with a brand new state-of-the-art building and major debt. He felt pressured to please his new congregation, fulfill all his responsibilities and reach out to new people. He was in the office early every day and out late with meetings or appointments.

His wife Teresa accepted the situation but his 2 ½ year old daughter Mandi was perplexed by his absence. In the past, Phil would read to Mandi a story after dinner each evening. He still did this but with one change: he would sit on the edge of the recliner, read Mandi a quick story or two and then rush out for another night of harried activity. Then one night Mandi said something that reminded Phil of his role as a father. Once again he sat on the edge of the recliner, ready to race out when Mandi interrupted Dad, patted the recliner seat and said, “Scoot back, Daddy, scoot back.” Mandi knew that on those rare occasions when Daddy was home for the evening he would relax, scoot back and read stories to her heart’s content. In her child-like way, Mandi was saying, “Please slow down Daddy. Relax. Make time for me!” So Phil scooted back.²

This Christmas, scoot back.

This Christmas, give your time.

You’ll have the most wonderful time all year.

² Phil LeMaster, Cane Ridge, Tennessee.