

“The Little White Envelope”

Matthew 6:19-21

The Advent Conspiracy – Week 2. Spend Less

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It’s a federal crime to open someone’s mail. But once a year, the New York Post Office breaks that law...and everyone has a jolly old time. It’s called Operation Santa Claus. The New York Post Office receives 155,000 letters addressed to Kris Kringle. Individuals and businesses open the letters and then fulfill their Christmas wishes. Now, in this high tech age, kids can text their requests straight to St. Nick. Here are a few:

- Kirsten, age 13, in Kokomo, Indiana writes, “Dear Santa, Don’t eat the cookies they are burnt (my dad made them!)”
- Kyle, age 9, in Swindon, United Kingdom said, “I have not got a belly button so can I have one of them for Christmas too.”
- Jessica, 11, from Lodi, California was more practical, “Do you have to keep a car battery and some jumper cables in the back of the sleigh just in case Rudolph’s nose ever goes out? Well just to be safe I’ll have some extra light bulbs next to the cookies ... 60 watts ok?”
- Ashley, 8, Oxford, United Kingdom, “Please wake me up so I can see the reindeer. You can even pour water on my head if you have to! (That’s what Mom has to do to get me out of bed!).

There are also some heartbreaking notes. Here are a few requests the post office found when they opened some envelopes last year:

Hello Santa,

My name is Alonzo I'm happy to write you this letter because I know you going to make me happy. I would like you to help my mother to find a job. I'm not happy, my brother he is 9 years old, and I'm 11 years old, we are praying and asking why she doesn't get a job.

Please don't send me toys just help my mother to get a job. Thank you. Bye bye Santa.

Dear Santa,

My name is Elisa. I'm 9 years old. I have two brothers and two sisters. I'm a good girl I do all my homework and I obey my mother. My father died seven years ago. I like activities and toys and clothes. Thank you Santa.

Dear Santa,

My name is Claudia S. and I am a single mother of a beautiful baby girl which is two months old. Her name is Rachel. I am 19 years old. I am struggling. I am not working and that's why I receive public assistance. I would like to buy clothes for me and my baby but I don't have money. Please send her diapers because I don't have money to buy

them. Santa if you send me at least something for me and my baby you are going to make us happy. God bless you,

Each family received help from Operation Santa Claus because of a message in a little white envelope.

This time of year, simple plain envelopes can carry urgent messages to the North Pole, Christmas cards from distant family, invitations to parties from nearby friends, letters of love from those close to your heart. There's no telling what's inside.

When God sent us a life-changing message, it came in an envelope – not of paper but human skin. The great miracle of Christmas is this: all of God – all His power, majesty and glory – somehow was entirely contained in the envelope of a baby. What's inside a little envelope can change everything. When that Child grew up He changed the way we look at the world and the way we see ourselves. And then He changed our lives and our final destination. This year, a little envelope can change your Christmas. It can change the way you look at the world and yourself. It can definitely change others' lives. And if you let it, this envelope may even change your life.

But first you must ask yourself: **Where is Your Treasure?** What do you treasure? What is valuable to you? And where is it stored? Jesus says,

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21

Why do we collect stamps, dolls or coins? Why do we fill closets with clothes, shoes and toys? Why do we pack our garages with cars and stuff? Why do we store bank accounts, college funds, stocks, bonds, 401Ks and IRAs in our portfolios? They are valuable to us. We treasure them. We feel we need them. And often we do. They are not bad. They are mostly good. The problem with these earthly treasures, according to Jesus, is they are *temporary*. Moths eat our clothes. Rust consumes our cars. Thieves steal your prized collections. And I don't have to tell you what can happen to that stock portfolio you were counting on. Yet we are trained to pour all our time, money and energy into acquiring and storing this stuff which will not last. They become our top priority. They define our position and status in society. They pump up our self-esteem. And they can all be gone in an instant.

We are trained to store earthly treasures from a very young age. Watch kids at Christmas. These days they can make up and print out their itemized wish lists with full color pictures and website links. At Christmas, kids are hungry for treasure. Yet all the treasures they desperately seek this month will probably be in storage next month and likely in the sanitation truck next year or two. Christmas consumerism starts young.

It wasn't always like this. One Christmas our family read "Little House on the Prairie" by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Laura and her sister Mary each received just one stocking. Inside each was a shiny new tin cup, a single candy cane, a little heart shaped cake and, best of all, a shining, bright, new penny! Laura writes,

They had never even thought of such a thing as having a penny. Think of having a whole penny for your very own. Think of having a cup and a cake and a stick of candy *and* a penny. There never had been such a Christmas.¹

When I heard that I couldn't stop laughing. Imagine giving that to kids today.

Maybe it's time for a change. Jesus told us not to store up earthly treasures. Instead, He said to invest in heavenly treasures. What are heavenly treasures? There is only one thing on this earth that's going to cross over into eternity: not possessions but people. Jesus wasn't born among possessions but among people. Jesus didn't teach us to gather possessions but people. Jesus didn't die to save possessions but people. I talk about tithing and pledging to God's ministry and mission here at Woodside because 100% of what you give goes to help people. Some of those people are the children, youth and adults around you in this sanctuary. Some are people in our area who don't know or follow Jesus. Some are people in Habitat houses, recovery houses, soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Some are people around the world you will never meet this side of heaven. All those people receive help to live more abundantly on earth and eternally in heaven. All those people are treasures and that's why Jesus wants us to make people our top priority, our highest investment. Jesus says,

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6: 21

This means your heart is attracted to what you treasure. If you treasure things on earth, your heart will be drawn like a magnet to earthly, temporary possessions. But if you treasure God and people, your heart will be drawn more toward heaven. If we worship Jesus above all earthly things, we will spend our money in a way that worships him and values what He values. This does not mean we must stop buying Christmas gifts. It does mean we can spend less on gifts for people who already have too much so we can spend more helping those who have far too little.

This Christmas season we have a unique opportunity to invest in people. The Advent Conspiracy is helping us see beyond the store sales, Christmas consumerism and even beyond our economic crisis to see a true crisis of monstrous proportions. Our Hope for Ukraine offering will provide hundreds of tons of food, thousands of pounds of medical supplies, millions of scripture resources, the building of several shelters, a counseling center, education for thousands of children, job placement, and language instruction for Ukrainians living in new countries. It will go to trusted partners such as the City Church in Lithuania, the Eastern European Reformation Ministry and God's Light Church which are in Poland 90 miles from the Ukrainian border, CRU in Romania, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church inside Ukraine and Mission Eurasia which offers humanitarian aid and spiritual support throughout the region.

We can afford to spend a little less on the Christmas machine in order to save lives. We can invest more in people than in possessions. We can put our money into heavenly treasure instead of more earthly treasure. Inside your bulletin is a white envelope you can

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, "A Little House Christmas," (Harper Collins: 1994).

used to give to this offering to help Ukrainian refugees. This year, instead of giving a sweater, a tie or a gift certificate for people on your list, give the gift of Hope in their name. Show your love for that person by giving an offering in their name. We have a gift card you can put on their tree. A little white envelope can change many lives including yours.

It did for Mike Garvin. His wife Nancy writes,

Mike, hated Christmas—oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it: overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute, the gifts given in desperation. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties.... I reached for something special just for Mike.

Our son Kevin was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear. They could not afford it. We ended up walloping them.

Mike shook his head sadly. "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." That's when the idea for his present came.

That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed an envelope on the tree. It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. The note inside told Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas. Each Christmas, I followed the tradition—one year sending a group of special needs youngsters to a hockey game, another year giving a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning, and our children would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the envelope never lost its allure.

The story doesn't end there. We lost Mike due to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was so wrapped up in grief that I barely got the tree up. But on Christmas Eve I placed an envelope on the tree, and in the morning it was joined by three more.

Each of our children had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing

around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelopes.

Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.²

Two years later, Nancy also died of cancer. The tradition of the white envelope lives on.

Heaven came down to earth sealed in the envelope of a new born babe. Make Heaven come down to earth again this Christmas with a little white envelope.

And wherever that treasure lands, there your heart will be also.

² Nancy Garvin, "For The Man who Hated Christmas," Woman's Day magazine December 14, 1982