

“What has Christmas Changed?” (Matthew 2:13-23)

December 30, 2007

Okay. Christmas is over. It was great while it lasted, but it's over. Now it's time to clean-up the left-over packaging; time to take down the decorations and put out the tree; time to write “thank you” notes and maybe coerce your kids into writing some, too; time to prepare yourself for the shock when the bills arrive. You spent weeks and weeks getting ready for the big day. But now that's all water under the bridge. Christmas is over.

So was it worth it? Did all that time and expense pay off? Did celebrating Jesus' birth make a difference this year? If so, what has Christmas changed?

I realize that's not the kind of question one can answer just like that. It takes some mulling over, doesn't it? *What has Christmas changed?* But it is a question *worth* mulling over. I mean, just being practical, what would be the point of going through all that work unless Christmas made some kind of difference? So the question is a good one: What has Christmas changed?

Certainly not society as a whole. We wouldn't expect it to change *that*. We know full well that society just plays at celebrating Christmas. Every year, there are decorations, parades, arts events, and the like, but most don't take Christmas seriously. It's more a comfy tradition, a break in the bleakness of winter, not to mention a last-minute spur to the economy. And since that's all it is, once it's over, things go back to the way they were. No, this year once again, Christmas hasn't really changed society.

But then again, neither did the first Christmas, which does seem strange. After all, it was the birth of God's Son, the long-awaited Savior, the one destined to reconcile us to God and win us eternal life. You would expect that to make a huge difference, wouldn't you? Or at least some. But at the time, society stayed pretty much the same. A few shepherds may have rejoiced at Jesus' birth, but otherwise life went on as usual. Wise men from the east may have followed the star, but the world as whole didn't notice. Rome stayed as strong as ever. King Herod stayed true to form. The rich stayed rich, the poor stayed poor, sinners kept sinning. No, sad to say, the first Christmas didn't change society, either.

And how that must have puzzled those who *knew* what Christmas meant! Take Joseph, for instance, especially at the point where we find him in our text. Gathering up his family to take them south for safety, I'll bet he wondered some why this flight was necessary, or why they'd had to face any of the hardships they'd been through. *This is God's work we're doing, so why doesn't He flex His muscles for us? It is His Son we're raising, so why doesn't God blast His enemies to kingdom come?* For as long as he could remember, Joseph had been taught that when the Messiah came, life would be different. But now He was here, and what was different? If anything, life had gotten worse! Herod was out to destroy Jesus. If they didn't move quickly, Jesus would be slaughtered by

royal troops. Now they had to go to a strange place where they knew no one. And how long would they have to stay there until the danger was past? This wasn't the way Joseph had pictured things. Not at all! Christmas was supposed to change things!

And 2000 years later, there are plenty of others who feel the same way – or even stronger. They ask: *If there really is a God, why doesn't He clean up the mess this world is in? If God really cares, why doesn't He rid the world of poverty, bloodshed, disease...or thugs like King Herod? If God really loves us, why does He allow such suffering to continue? Especially once He sent Jesus into the world to be our Savior? What was the point of Jesus' coming if it didn't make a difference? What was point of Christmas if nothing changed?*

And what can we answer? Well, perhaps this. Was the point of Jesus' coming to just clean up our mess and leave us the way we are? Was the point of Jesus' coming to free us from responsibility for the shape our world is in? Was the point of Jesus' coming to spare us the need to repent and change our ways; or the need to stand up to evil; or the need to make a difference ourselves? Is that what Christmas was all about? Of course not! And what was the point? Jesus came to save us from sin for godliness; to save us from being the problem for fighting the problem. And based on God's track record, what else would we expect? Even if God does sometimes miraculously change circumstances, as a rule He prefers to change hearts so that we will change circumstances. And even if God does sometimes miraculously show His power, as a rule He prefers to equip us with the power to make a difference. God is not responsible for the mess this world is in. People are. So if things are going to change, it can't be just by a wave of God's magic wand; otherwise we'll be back to the same-old-same-old before you know it. People must change – must change in mind, in heart, and behavior. Only then will society change. Yes, people must change, and we only change one by one. So if Christmas didn't change society, that's to be expected. But has Christmas changed people...people like you and me? That's the real question.

In Joseph's case, the answer was clear. In fact, as they headed toward Egypt, I can imagine him thinking to himself: *Christmas may not have changed society, but it has changed me – so from here on out I'm going to operate accordingly.*

And did he ever! Joseph may not fit our usual picture of a super-hero, but when you consider all he did for this Child who wasn't even his; when you consider all he risked, all he went through...well, even without the spandex and the cape, he's a pretty amazing hero – and as good a model for a Christian parent as any I can think of! Never do we see Joseph putting his own feelings first. Just asking: *What does God want me to do?* Never do we hear Joseph complaining about his role. Just saying: *Thy will be done.* And that had to have been hard! Imagine how people must have talked behind his back when, in spite of everything, he still took Mary as his wife! That didn't deter Joseph: *Let them talk! This is God's will.*

And how people must have gossiped when he took Mary with him to Bethlehem, especially with her being 9-months pregnant. But that didn't deter Joseph, either: *Let them gossip! This is God's plan.* Then to go through such pains to keep them safe in Egypt. Then to go back to Nazareth knowing how tough life would be. Then to do all he did to raise Jesus as his own; to do all he could to set Jesus a godly example; to do all he must to give Jesus the spiritual upbringing he deserved – even all the time and expense of going to Jerusalem each Passover. Man! And mind you, he did it all without ever seeing how things would turn out! Just did it because that's what faith required. Yes, Joseph was a hero if ever there was one! And why? Because he believed in Jesus. He believed in the meaning of Jesus' birth. Believed enough that it made a real difference in his life, in his attitude, in his priorities. That's what Christmas changed!

If we look into our own hearts, I think we'll find that's what Christmas has changed in us, too. The only question is how much it's changed us; to what degree. And with a new year ahead of us, what better time could there be to focus even more on this change, to really cultivate it intentionally?

It won't be easy. Far from it. In fact, we'll face more challenges than we may expect. For remember: *Christmas hasn't really changed society*, and we need to recognize what that means. We may not face the challenges Joseph faced, we may not be up against a latter-day King Herod, but neither is the society we live in *spiritually neutral*. In ways subtle and not so subtle, our Christian values are ignored, even scorned by society. In ways hidden and not so hidden, God's commandments are treated with contempt. And instead of just going, "Baaaa. Whatever..." we need to realize that there'll be times when we'll need to stand against the tide, stand up for God's ways, however unpopular that may be. Living under freedom of religion won't exempt us from this. In fact, it may even complicate it.

I think most of you know that I have cousins who grew up under communism in east Germany. That was hard, but then at least the choices were clear. If you went to church, you could forget about playing team sports. If you were confirmed, you could forget about going to college or getting a good job. If you practiced your faith, you could expect public ridicule, police observation, and obstacles of every kind. Pretty hard! But at least the choices were clear. In our own enlightened society, we would never countenance such anti-Christian pressure, would we? For instance, our community would never think of scheduling kids' sports on a Sunday morning, so that kids would have to choose whether to play on the team or keep the third commandment and go to church. Oh, wait! That does happen. Regularly. In fact, this year our city even scheduled a softball tournament on Easter morning. And come to think of it, sports isn't the only culprit. The same thing happens with music and scholastics and other youth activities. So much for society being spiritually neutral. Nor is this a gray-area on which Christians can have differing opinions. God didn't say, "Forget the Sabbath Day unless you've got nothing better to do." He said,

“Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.” He said it in the New Testament, too: **“Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some...”**

Now, some may hear this and think: *Yeah, that does happen, but it's just one example...and such a little thing at that!* I disagree. How breaking any commandment could be just a little thing, I don't know, but this is definitely not the only example. Do a quick run through all the commandments, and you'll see what I mean. Society might think it's fine, even cute, when people routinely take God's name in vain – but not a Christian. Society might think it's fine to schedule whatever it likes on Sunday morning – but not a Christian. Society might think it's right for laws and institutions to countermand the authority of parents – but not a Christian. Society might think abortion is a convenient way to end an inconvenient pregnancy, or that euthanasia is an enlightened way to end a life – but not a Christian. Society might think that sex outside of marriage is okay, whatever floats your boat, and that to say otherwise makes you a bigot – but not a Christian. Society might think it's okay to break copyright laws, or to fudge a little on taxes, or to ignore the needy – but not a Christian. Society might think you can play fast and loose with the truth, that gossip is no big deal, or that smearing political leaders is just a part of the democratic process – but not a Christian. Society might think it's fine to set your heart on stuff, even other people's stuff; or that envy and greed and coveting are perfectly acceptable – but not a Christian. And let's not forget the first and foremost commandment! Society might think it's fine, even necessary, for life to revolve around work or sports or any number of other things, but for a Christian, life's focus is quite clear: **“I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before Me.”** Need I say more? There are plenty of examples – many more than I've already named – that show our society is not *spiritually neutral*. It's anything but neutral! And where are the heroes like Joseph who will recognize what they're up against? Where are the heroes like Joseph who will stand firm in the Christian way? Where are the heroes like Joseph who will spiritually protect those entrusted to them? And set them a godly example? And put God's will first, come what may?

If Christmas has changed us, the answer is: *I will be that person*. If the meaning of Jesus' birth has made a difference in our lives, the answer is: *I will be God's man or God's woman, whatever situation I'm in, whatever the situation calls for*. And if this is indeed our commitment, then as we enter a new year, Christmas will not be over. Quite the opposite. As Howard Thurman once said: *“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, then the real work of Christmas begins...”* This work may not seem heroic. But doing our part for Jesus' sake; standing firm in faith, living out our values, sharing the good news for Jesus' sake: this is what changes lives, changes situations, may even change society – and in the meantime, it shows that Christmas has changed us. Amen.