

Practical Proverbial, Santa Claus the Cheerful Giver, 11 December 2017

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:7.

Let's take a few days away from breaking down the Bible verse by verse. Since it's Christmastime, let's talk about Santa. You see, I believe in Santa Claus. Now, it's a running joke in our family that my wife is an elf. Or at least part elf. Her Godly love language is acts of service and it is innate to her very being that she loves to serve others, mainly by giving. It's not the gift that matters but making someone else's life a little better that matters most to her. If she has pointy ears and hails from the North Pole then I haven't seen it. But if Hollywood is ever looking for someone who I think could have worked for Santa, look no further than my home. If you ask Hunnie, she'll eagerly respond that she, too, believes in Santa.

Now, if you're a follower of Jesus, you're probably familiar with the annual "Jesus versus Santa" debate. You've seen the signs saying "Jesus is the reason for the season." For a long time I was one of the people exercised about the idea of Santa Claus crowding out the reality of Jesus. Santa seemed so secular, an Easter Bunny in a fluffy red hat. The magic of a fat Norseman slinking down a chimney to give away gifts seemed like a sweetly ominous distraction from the godhead becoming one with His creation to give us the gift of eternal love. I get it; I accept it, too. For years it created conflict in me, wanting to be a true believer in Jesus but not wanting to completely reject the mostly harmless concept of Santa. I mean, in our society, what kind of monster could reject Saint Nick, the venerated gift-giver to good little girls and boys?

Not this one. Yes, I'm a dirty sinner (like you, even like the real Saint Nicholas of Myra), but I came to the point of thinking there is no conflict, there is no harm, there's no sin in believing in Santa. I won't even offer the cautionary aside of reminding you of the differences between Jesus and Santa; I believe you get those on your own. Instead, if it is wrong to believe in Santa, explain to me how 2 Corinthians 9:7 lines up with the idea of Santa. The story of Santa Claus is inseparable from the idea of cheerful giving. And the notion of being a cheerful giver is inseparable from 2 Corinthians 9:7. God is all about giving us gifts because He does it every day. He gives us the ultimate gift of free life symbolized by His incarnation in Bethlehem. He gives us the gift through the idea of sharing that loving life through the concept of a jolly old man wanting to simply love on perfect strangers.

Sure, Santa wasn't a real person whereas Jesus Christ is. We'll discuss the aforementioned Saint Nicholas later. But God's love is real whether someone is fiction or not. God's love simply is, and God loves a cheerful giver. If Santa was a real person, God would love him for being that cheerful giver. Our world could use some more of that, so maybe sharing a little cheerfully giving Santa love is really sharing the true love of Jesus. I can't think of anyone who wouldn't benefit from that.

We own a Christmas ornament (and an accompanying children's book) showing Santa kneeling in praise at the manger of Jesus. I think that fits. I think the story of Santa complements the history of Jesus. To people who reject that, well, God bless you. On this we believe different things. And if you're like me and you still believe, then God bless you, too, this Christmas season. Ho, ho, ho and merry Christmas whether you believe in Santa or not. If you're nice, my Hunnie might just send you a gift.

For further reading: Acts 20:35.

Lord, thank You for the story of Santa Claus. Let this popular fable be a way we can give you praise and glory.

Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 12 December 2017

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' Acts 20:35.

Giving makes us better people. Churches that ask for tithes know this. Your manager at work knows this. Political campaigns know this (ok, maybe not so much). Your teenage kids know this (ok, not so much again, though we hope they'll learn it). In 21st century America, the most popular symbol of Christmas is Santa. He's at the center of what we consider Christmas to be. But when you scratch off the red velvet and ring the jingle bells you see that the center of Santa is Christ. It's impossible to reach any other conclusion without rejecting the words here in Acts 20. Whether the inspiration is Coca Cola, Hollywood, or pop culture, our notion of Santa Claus always goes back to Saint Nicholas of Myra, the bishop of Myra (in Turkey) who lived from 270 to 343 AD: only about 240 years after the life of Jesus. Nicholas is the patron saint of many tradesmen, and his life spanned persecution and torture by the Romans, pardon from the Emperor Constantine (who split the Roman empire) and sitting in the council of Nicaea (in which the early church was reorganized).

But his greatest gift was in giving. A most likely true legend has it that Nicholas gave a bag of gold to each of a poor man's three daughters because the father was too poor to afford a dowry. Some versions of the legend have him throwing the coins through a window, others down a chimney and landing in stockings. No matter how it happened, over time this morphed into the concept of Santa Claus that we know today. In the 1800 years since Nicholas died, his tradition has been compounded with that of Father Christmas (dating the Tudor England of the 1500s), practices of Martin Luther (to focus kids on Christ instead of Saint Nicholas), Sinterklaas and Pere Noel in Europe, and Scandanavian Yule traditions. Here in America, Clement Moore's famous poem from the 1820s popularized the idea of Santa as did advertising pictures from Harper's Bazaar and Coca Cola in the late 19th century. And don't forget the popular editorial response which said "yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

Giving is the glue that binds together those representations of Santa; self-less giving to children and the poor. All along the timeline from Saint Nicholas until today the saint of Christmas gives to those who have not. He blesses others by giving to them things they want and need. In doing so, what he's really doing is giving them the love of Jesus. He inculcates a gift to a stranger with the strange gift that God gave us. You and I don't deserve grace any more than a child 'deserves' an extravagant gift under the tree. We don't earn gifts but God gives them anyway. We weren't looking for the Christ child in Bethlehem but He came there anyway and the angels then sang of His glory. Without the spirit of Jesus, there is no giving. Our very concept of Santa is thick with giving and, therefore, replete with Jesus.

Gifts are acts of mercy to other people, reflections of what we believe. To give to someone with no expectation of anything in return is righteous, it is Christ-like. To give is to share God's grace. Nicholas of Myra understood that when he gave gold to women who wouldn't otherwise have been able to marry (something that would likely have resulted in their resorting to prostitution). If you separated the concept of Santa Claus from giving, you wouldn't have Santa anymore. You wouldn't even have a good advertising gimmick. Santa gives to share, to make others better, to give things they wouldn't otherwise have. If the center of today's celebrations is Santa, then the center of Santa is selfless giving. You can't give selflessly without first having the love of Jesus in your heart. Apart from Him we can do nothing. Therefore, apart from Jesus, Santa could give nothing. The next time you get down about how commercialism is ruining Christmas, remember that the spirit of Christmas is still Santa and still, therefore, all about Jesus.

For further reading: Luke 6:38.

Lord, thank You for how giving makes us better people. Thank You for giving us this gift of mercy, of sharing, of Your Spirit.

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Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 13 December 2017

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Luke 6:38.

These are real words of Jesus. It makes sense, you know, to have some things said by Jesus in a blog that talks about Jesus and why today’s symbol of Jesus’ birthday is still all about Jesus. It REALLY makes sense to think of giving in the way Jesus describes it here in Luke 6. Giving is the most selfless thing you can do in the way of bettering your self-interest. Huh? It’s the ‘why’ behind the ‘what’ in the story of Santa Claus.

My favorite story of Santa is the Rankin Bass animated program “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” You probably have seen it at one time or another. Mickey Rooney, Fred Astaire, Keenan Wynn. It’s the fable of Kris Kringle taking toys to Sombertown give them away to the children. The evil Burgermeister Meisterburger tries to thwart Kris, who then learns how to sneak into town, leave toys in stockings, and use flying reindeer to get around. One scene in the show even has Mr. and Mrs. Claus getting married on Christmas Eve, deemed “the holiest night of the year.” Imagine that: running off every year on your anniversary to spend it giving away free stuff to a bunch of total strangers who happen to be underage.

No, this isn’t a 2017 political campaign. It’s the essence of giving. Kris Kringle gave away toys because giving was a way he could love. In the show, Santa gave because it made him feel good to share, to make a child smile. In your life, you give because it makes you feel good to do so. The reason is the same: to feel good. When you dig deeper, you discover it isn’t just some dopamine rush. You feel better when you do the right thing. You do the right thing when you do as God requests. Logical transition: you feel better when you do as God requests. Jesus said “give and it will be given to you.” He isn’t setting up some divine wishing well. Instead, He was talking about transforming one’s heart. Give because your heart tells you to love someone this way. When you love, you’ll be loved back. Giving is love. When we love through giving, we’re bettering someone else’s life while indirectly bettering ourselves.

That’s what Jesus was saying here in Luke 6. He said that, the more we love, the more we’re loved back. The good measure, pressed down and given back, is an expression of love for you. Even more than that, it’s a reflection of the love that is God Almighty. We simply have to share it. If you enjoy the idea of Santa giving selflessly what you’re really enjoying is a form of God’s love for all of us. Giving is love and God always gives mercifully, gracefully, endlessly. It’s part of His character, and it’s first, best expression is the baby born on Christmas Day. You know, the one Santa celebrates.

Giving makes us better, and cheerful givers turn into better people, which pleases God. Underneath all that is the solid foundation that giving is love, that love is Jesus. When we give selflessly like Santa Claus would give, we share Jesus. Knowing that, here’s a quote from Martin Luther: “To love is not to wish one another well, but to carry one another’s burdens, that is, things that are grievous to us, and that we would not willingly bear.” When you see Santa with a child on his lap, remember that is a symbol of the older man wanting to help the younger person bear life’s hurt. When you think of the baby in the manger, remember that He came here to live as a man specifically to carry our sins for us. And the next time you hear Mickey Rooney as Kris Kringle, remember that the bag of toys he carries on his shoulder is actually a way to give love while taking up someone else’s love burden.

For further reading: John 14:27.

Oh Christmas Lord, thank You for showing us how You give to share Your love.

Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 14 December 2017

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” The song is sung to a poem by Longfellow, and the fourth verse of it sings, “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep, God is not dead, nor doth he sleep, The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, With peace on earth, good will to men.” That song was written in the late 1800s, but it has a message for us today. God is not dead nor does he sleep. He is active in our lives today, right now. God coming to earth to do just that IS Christmas. It is the story of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Flash forward from the 1800s until now. Our Christmas today includes the character of Santa Claus. A fictional creation amalgamated from our past, Santa is the Christmas that people who don't believe in Jesus celebrate. He's about giving, being jolly, loving children. According to a story in the New York Times just yesterday (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/13/us/christmas-less-religious.html>) only 55% of Americans who celebrate Christmas do so as a religious holiday. Noodle that for a second. According to that survey, 45% – nearly half – of the people in the United States celebrate Christmas without considering it is a holiday to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Yet peace is still at the center of the holiday. The Christmas song above is but one mention of it. Christmas cards mention “peace on earth”. You see it on road signs, yard signs, billboards, and internet postings everywhere. Even unbelievers embrace the idea of peace between men. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth good will to men. A mythical fat man in a red suit shows up every Christmas Eve to give children, good and bad, Jesus-followers or not, a gift of good will: all so they might find a little enjoyment, a little love and peace. How much more, then, does the idea of a gift from Santa mean when we consider that “peace on earth, good will to men” is a quote from Luke 2:14. They were the words spoken by angels to the shepherds who followed and went to find the newborn Christ child.

You can't believe in Santa Claus and not embrace the idea from Luke. Giving is love and giving is Christ-like. Santa's behavior is modeled on that, is a reflection of that. The gifts Santa gives are to commemorate the birth of Jesus, foretold by prophets, announced by angels, and witnessed by common men. The amazing life that started that night fleshed out the Savior who would one day teach that God doesn't give the way men give. God gives real peace, real love. He frees us from the burden of sin, from the worries of punishment, from the guilt of dreading justice. Jesus loves us enough to let us live our lives as we please while living them within us, beside us. He sees when we screw up and always beckons us to a better way, to His way. His way is that peace, which is more than just contentment. All that started that first Christmas Day in Judea.

On his best day, which is Christmas, whoever is Santa in your life just gives you new toys. That's a good thing, but there's so much more to it. I'm not here to wage some “Jesus versus Santa” throw-down. I'm here to simply tell the way it is. And still, in our time, when the bells of Christmas ring, they echo peace on earth good will to men. No matter what you believe, that's a good thing. The greater thing, then, is how that peace always comes back to Jesus.

For further reading: Romans 8:32.

Lord, thank You for Your peace.

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Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 15 December 2017

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Romans 8:32.

This is a message that is easily lost when you think of Santa. In fact, I suspect it's part of the reason – maybe even THE reason – why so many followers of Jesus actively, vociferously disdain all things Santa. Santa can't save you from your sins but Jesus does. Santa can't give you all things your heart really desires but Jesus does. Santa can't this, Santa can't this, but Jesus does. All true, all like a boring confirmation class quiz. I get it.

So don't lose the message of Romans 8 when you're busy defending Jesus, ok? I get the idea of defending Christmas, of defending Jesus. Are we really so arrogant to think God can't defend Himself without our help? It might be a noble thing, especially since the idea of Christmas as the birth of Christ is under attack in our age of Muslimism and atheism. But we lose sight of God's giving when we get busy defending our positions. How about we step back a bit and look for some common ground? What He gave still matters. What Santa gives reflects that.

We've talked about how giving is Christ-like, how Christ-like giving is the foundation of the idea of Santa Claus. But have you considered the gift itself? The character we know as Santa exhibits the best of Jesus' attitude, namely to give glory to God by expressing agape love, of showing love to someone who doesn't deserve it by giving them something from yourself. That attitude, that giving heart, is central to Jesus' character as well. But the gift matters too. What you are given can matter as much as the heart of the person giving it.

Consider this: kids go to see Santa, or write letters to Santa, telling him what they most want. They reveal their most urgent material desires to him. The story of Santa, then, is how Santa fulfills those most urgent requests for the good little girls and boys by bringing them things they want most. Winner winner chicken dinner.

Consider this as well: people pray to Jesus their innermost thoughts about their most urgent desires. We express our groaning to Him about things that matter most to us. We give our requests to Him, and sometimes those requests are even self-less. But Jesus always answers them, even when we don't understand the answer. And in addition to that, God then gives us a redemption that only He can give. He gives us eternal life with Himself. That gift matters most. He promises it to us, and His promise is always sure, always reliable, always true. He proved it by promising to redeem us, then giving us the life blood of His most precious being, His Son, to secure it. He did it for us, not because He had to. God the Father and Spirit gave His Son to us because He wanted to, because He could. He did it because He loved us unconditionally. Love for love's sake, giving because of love's sake, the gift of Jesus Himself. The ultimate Christmas gift. His gift brings peace on earth and good will to men.

Every gift given since then, whether gifts of the Magi or gifts from Santa's workshop, is a reflection of God's gift to us. THAT gift matters most because eternity always matters most. No matter what else Santa brings you this year, when you realize God gave you this, you realize you've gotten more than you could honestly want. Don't ever lose sight of that.

For further reading: Romans 12:8.

My Lord, thank You for the gift of Your Son. Of the idea of Santa who reflects Your wonderful gift.

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Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 18 December 2017

...if it is giving, then give generously. Romans 12:8.

Let's talk about the gift of the magi, but not the wonderful O Henry story.

Yesterday I was reading a bit in Matthew 2, the book & chapter that discusses the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus. You know the account. Wise men from east of Israel showed up in Bethlehem, looking for the Christ child. They were (presumably) astrologer 'kings' who saw a special star that they believed would lead them to the Messiah; Martin Luther thought they might have been learned men, perhaps professors even. We don't know when they showed up, though scholars today (supposedly wise men themselves) seem to think it was while Jesus was a toddler. That would mean Joseph, Mary and Jesus lived in Bethlehem for a good long time after the Roman census was complete. In the end, we don't truly know. The wise men presented three gifts we know of, though to be honest we don't know if there were only three gifts. We also don't know if there were only three wise men. Tradition has assigned them names of Balthazar, Melchior and Gaspar (of Arabia, Persia, and India respectively), but we don't specifically know that to be true, either.

What we do know is that the magi gave generously. The gifts they brought – gold, frankincense and myrrh – wouldn't have been given to commoners in first century Judea. They weren't things that common Jewish children received at birth. If kids of that time received anything, it probably wouldn't have been those gifts because they were extraordinarily expensive and usually given only to wealthy or royal people. The makeup of the gifts themselves only adds mystery to the story. Years ago I heard a sermon where the minister wondered if Mary didn't keep the three precious birth gifts from the magi to use in embalming and burying Jesus, especially given that myrrh and frankincense were used for embalming in Bible times. I suppose that's possible.

Flash forward to Santa. Santa's gift-giving reflects that of the magi. There's no set rule saying Santa brings you only one toy; that, too, is open to tradition. He might bring you one, two or three. He might even bring you gold, frankincense, and myrrh, though I'm not sure those would compete well against a PS4 in today's world. But the comparison still remains: the story of Santa is one of giving generously. Santa gives out of an abundance of the desire to give, to share agape love with total strangers and innocent children. Santa goes to whatever extremes are necessary to get you the gift you desire just to make your life a little brighter. It's because of a Christ-like heart that someone gives generously.

My wife has over 30 nativity scenes in her collection. I think she loves the story of the magi even more than the story of the immaculate birth because of the wonder of three learned men from far away lands showing up to worship this holy child. The glitterati of the day saw something unusual in that star that they considered to be a miracle. They saw and they believed. This same wife of mine also still believes in Santa. It's a game we play in our family. Say you believe in Santa and you get a cool gift from Mom and Dad (even though our children are grown and gone). Say you don't believe and those gifts stop. Saying you don't believe would be evidence of a generous heart growing cold, of starting to lose sight of the miracle that is Christmas. Saying you don't believe in Santa is like saying you don't believe in giving generously. Or in the gift of the magi.

For further reading: Deuteronomy 26:11, Matthew 2.

Lord, I believe in You. I believe in Your gift of giving generously. I praise You for the story of the Magi, and for inspiring a spirit of giving in the story of Santa and in each of us.

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Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 19 December 2017

Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household. Deuteronomy 26:11.

It's the week before Christmas and, if we're having an honest conversation about Santa Claus, we need to face some facts about the world we live in. We each know people who are having a tough time this year. One friend of mine is struggling to give her kids and grandkids the kind of happy Christmas she never had when she was growing up, and she feels she's failing. Another friend of mine is struggling with the recent diagnosis of a terminal brain tumor. Yet another confesses her broken-heartedness on her first Christmas as a single mom following her divorce. One of my sons-in-law is deployed overseas, spending his first Christmas away from his wife and daughter; his wife and daughter are very much missing Dad. Another friend of mine is struggling with schizophrenia. One of my classmates is being buried today after her untimely death last week. I'm losing my house. And we're supposed to rejoice over all this? Actually, yes, and it really isn't that difficult to do.

Think of "A Christmas Carol", of Scrooge's overnight transformed heart. Or the Santa Clause movie where Tim Allen brightens up the teacher's holiday party by using a little Santa magic. Consider the lines of excited kids lining up to see Santa. Or the bell-ringer wearing a Santa hat who wishes you a merry Christmas when you drop a few coins into the red kettle. Rejoice. Rejoice, already. God gives us the basics but so much more. If you don't believe that, go do some Santa watching at the mall. Reject the crass commercialism and just watch the little kids. Watch how they anticipate, and how a kind old man spends some time with them to listen and love a little. Then rejoice already. Rejoice on days good and bad alike because the same Christ Child, born on Christmas Day, reflected by a character we call "Santa," is Lord of all.

In it all, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. You know it, the Christmas hymn. According to Wikipedia, the words to the hymn come from the 1700s while the medieval dirge to which they're sung comes from France of the 1500s. Yet I love the song. It is actually one of the more hopeful ones you'll hear this Christmas because the refrain constantly reminds us to rejoice over how Jesus Emmanuel has ransomed us from ourselves. How "Emmanuel" actually means "God with us." How He is with us now.

Rejoice, too, because one of Emmanuel's representatives here in our world is that jolly fat man in the red suit. That attitude of giving selflessly is cause enough to begin the rejoicing. The heart that gives is the heart of hope, and in the face of real adversity we need more of that hope. Only Jesus can truly give that hope, but you, me, and acting like Santa can share it. That's what keeps the world going around. The people of 1500s France knew it. The magi knew it. Moses knew it when he penned Deuteronomy. And the men who play Santa at the mall know it.

I'm not trying to be Pollyanna concerning the hard condition in which we find ourselves. Living can hurt. Yet the very real antidote to being crushed by this world is letting ourselves be lifted up by God instead. Loss, death, and pain still happen, but they cannot defeat a heart focused on giving through rejoicing. Indeed, the only way to persevere through those things is with that rejoicing heart of Jesus. In hard times, that may be the only gift we can get or give. Like the song, so much of our lives is sung in a minor key. How much better it is, then, to consider the smile of Santa's face, the touch of Jesus' hand, and the fresh day today to rejoice one moment at a time.

For further reading: Matthew 25:29.

My Lord, I rejoice at Your wonder, at how You provide for us and love us. Help me to persevere through adversity today. And ease the pain of those who are struggling right now. Love and nurture them, Lord.

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Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 20 December 2017

For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Matthew 25:29.

You know the best thing about giving? It's giving again. Just ask the men who play Santa Claus.

Recently there was a story in the local (Dallas) news about a woman who took her kids to see the same Santa Claus every year for decades. She had several dozen picture of kids, year after year, sitting with the exact same actor. He was like family to her, and when he moved to a new location, she loyally took her business to see him. This year is different, however, because in 2017 the man passed away. The story outlined the woman's sadness at losing the man who had become a part of her life. And it also focused on her thankfulness for having known him. Something about him kept her coming back to him year after year.

And something about being Santa kept him coming back year after year. I've never worn a Santa suit but I'm betting that the reason so many people do so year after year is a giving heart. It's about giving little kids a smile, and a little agape love, and seeing them happy. It's about sharing part of the magic that is the Christmas season. Even unbelievers can't deny that there is a buzz in the air during Christmas. That buzz is love, and it's love exemplified through giving.

Here in Matthew 25, Jesus said that a giving heart compounds love. Don't be sucked into a materialistic interpretation of the verse: what Christ is really talking about is love. When you love, you get love in return. When you give out of love, you receive more than you give (even if you receive nothing physical in return). When you love unconditionally, you begin to know God's heart. It's the heart behind it that grows. More importantly, God's glory grows as His love is shared. What's more, when we give out of love, we store up real treasure in heaven, where we will be able to fully embrace all of God unencumbered by the hazy filter of our sins.

We all want more of that. Even those who believe in neither Jesus nor Santa Claus want more love. If you want to break the ice with someone who's hostile, you start with kindness, giving them the gift of yourself unsheltered. As the walls break down, you give more and more, and the hostile person's demeanor usually changes. After all, what was missing in Mr. Scrooge's heart? Love, and when there was no love his capacity to give, to share, dried up. When the love returned, so did his giving.

That's the aspect of Santa Claus which is so attractive. It isn't really the idea of getting something you want for free. No, what keeps kids believing in Santa is that he loves freely and gives even more freely. It doesn't take much effort, then, to mature from Santa to learning about the life of Jesus and the real reason for Christmas. Noodle it for awhile and you see that the love of a giving Santa is, perhaps, the best expression of Jesus' giving love in our world today. And the more you learn about Jesus, the more you see that the real holiday of love isn't Christmas Day or even Valentine's Day. No, the real holiday that centers on giving and love is Easter. At Easter, God's love was completely fulfilled for us. Without Christmas, there would be no Easter, and without Easter Christmas is just another birthday. Besides, the Easter Bunny is no Santa.

For further reading: Ephesians 4:7.

Lord Jesus, as we celebrate Your birthday, help me to better give as You give: selflessly, with a loving heart, and unconditionally, so that I may know an abundance of You.

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Practical Proverbial, about Santa Claus, 21 December 2017

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. Ephesians 4:7.

Finally, let's talk about Santa and God's grace. In our increasingly secular America, where hostility threatens to crowd out any faith except itself, where crime and real hatred work to undo the works of love, at this time of year, Santa is all about grace. Santa and God's grace? I thought the hyper-Christians and Santa-Haters owned the topic of grace! There actually is an unspoken "war on Christmas" and some of the primary combatants relentlessly defend the position that God Almighty is the author of peace on earth and good will toward men. The secular 'god' of Santa Claus is one of the vehicles used to fight against the truth of Jesus. Anything related to Christmas that isn't all and only Jesus must be eradicated. They couldn't be more wrong.

Grace is unmerited mercy. You don't do anything to earn it or deserve it. It is love freely given to you by God because He's God and He loves us. He loves us so much that He wasn't willing for us to be apart from him. Our sins earned us permanent separation from God but He didn't want that for us because His love is too good to withhold. So, in the ultimate act of grace, God came here to Earth as a man and gave His life as an atonement for our sins. All of that was beautifully exemplified on Christmas morning when God gave us that first Christmas gift. Every year, both religious and secular America commemorate that gift, in part, by celebrating the magnanimity of Santa Claus. Without Christ there is no Christmas, and without Christmas there is no Santa Claus, whose heart is focused on giving, on sharing with strangers simply because he can. He does it on and only on Christmas: the birthday of God. How is that not grace?

But but but...what about that naughty and nice list? If the fruit of God's Spirit is visible through good works, and those good works are lauded by both God and Santa Claus, then is it unreasonable to expect both God and Santa would disapprove of our naughty works? God turns us over to the consequences of our unrepentant hearts. Is it any wonder that part of the Santa story would include the same thing? And yet, even knowing we naughty people deserve punishment, God still gives us our lives, our health, and everything we are. It's pure grace. As for Santa, be reasonable: other than my parents and politicians, do you honestly know of anyone who has ever put a lump of coal in your stocking? Grace again.

Christ apportioned true grace for us by giving His very life so we wouldn't have to give ours. He bridged the chasm between damnation and salvation and made it possible for us to avoid the former. Christ gives the gift of salvation that Santa doesn't, and He did it out of the kind of love that makes Santa's look cheap. Face it: Santa doesn't love the way Jesus loves; that's simply the way it is. Yet love it is from Saint Nick all the same, and when we consider how many people in our world need love, well, maybe we shouldn't be so quick to condemn it. Maybe the idea of Santa Claus is simply an extension of our faith in God, of appreciating His grace in giving us things we want but don't deserve.

Thank you, my friend, for reading these words, and Merry Christmas to you. I hope they've helped you and made you think of things you might not otherwise have considered. More than that, I hope they've planted in you the seed of curiosity to investigate God's Word even more. In parting this year, I'll challenge you to take a few minutes on Christmas Eve and read Luke 2. Read it in the King James version because, in my opinion, the first twenty verses of Luke 2 when read in that 15th century English are the most beautiful words ever written. Take a few minutes to thank God for them, and for sending His only Son to be born on Christmas as a man. Then thank Him, too, for the coming Easter that fulfills the promise of eternity. Last, thank our Lord for the gift of the story of Santa Claus and how jolly old St. Nick is actually a herald of our Savior in Bethlehem.

For further reading: Luke 2 (in the King James version).

Thank You, Lord, for Your grace, Your gift, and Your love. Thank You for Christmas...and Easter.

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