

*“All I Want For Christmas”*  
*“The Gift of a New Style of Life”*

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Key Text: Matthew 23:23-26

## **I. Introduction: From a Baby in a Manger to a Man of Purpose**

I find it interesting that at Christmas time we are so taken by a baby named Jesus, born in a manger, in the poorest of conditions; praised by angels, visited by lowly shepherds. As we prepare to light candles tonight and tomorrow night we sing sweet songs of “Away in a Manger” and “Silent Night—All is calm, All is bright”. It is a precious, heart-felt, touching moment. It gives us what so many of us long for, at least in the moment, a sense of peace and assurance that God is with us and God is present for us.

What gets hard is when this baby grows up and begins to teach and preach and interact with all sorts of people. The common, everyday person, soldiers, tax collectors, the wealthy, the poor, the sick, and demon-possessed. Is this a story for Christmas? Then there’s the religious folk Jesus deals with. The ones who come to the temple on a regular basis, many who are leaders of the Jewish faith. In this text today, Jesus is confronting the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were one among many Jewish religious and political groups and schools of thought. They were experts on the law, primarily from the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. They believed if one followed the law you could live in “holiness” outside the temple. The Pharisees provide the origin to today’s Rabbis. The Sadducees were priests who believed holiness came through the temple through sacrifice. They were more of an upper, ruling class. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees did not.

## **II. Jesus Confronts Our Traditional Religious Systems**

Jesus then was often in opposition to the Pharisees and we see this in our text today because Jesus came to fulfill the law. What we see for us is it’s rather easy to bow down and worship a sweet baby born in a manger. It’s another thing to give our hearts and lives to a man named Jesus who often confronts religious traditions and practices that tend to focus on outward appearance versus a transformation of the heart and how one truly lives.

We didn’t read all the verses in this particular section, but let’s listen on: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like white-washed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones....”

This baby, whose birth we celebrate on Tuesday, sure doesn’t sound like someone that’s just meek and mild. What was Jesus hoping for? Why would he say such harsh words and even call the religious leaders snakes and a brood of vipers?

I think because he knew they were focusing on the wrong things. Outwardly it looked like they were doing all the right things. They were tithing, I’m sure dressing and grooming appropriately. They likely knew the law like the back of their hand. They taught the letter of the law and they attempted to live “holy” lives. Is our focus very off base, especially at Christmas when we get so busy?

## **III. Wesley’s Greatest Fear**

It’s almost like John Wesley’s greatest fear for the people called Methodist. He said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodist should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”

Do you think there is any truth to that today? Is it not part of the reason Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his day? In what ways are we different? Or are we?

The good news of Christmas is God sent Jesus to save the people from their sins. Let’s admit it, there are times we all put on a good outward appearance when inside we know things aren’t quite right. We are at odds with a loved

one, a child, a spouse, a parent, a friend, and our thoughts, words, and sometimes actions, fall way short of holy. They likely are more unholy thoughts, words, and actions.

Jesus has come to us to forgive us of our sins and to invite us into a new way of thinking, speaking, and acting. A new way of living. That's what this child in the manger offers us.

#### **IV. A New Way of Understanding This Christmas**

In James Moore's Advent devotion, he offers some ideas about this new way of understanding and therefore new way, or new style, of living. The style of living he speaks of comes to us by way of this baby named Jesus, God's son, who has come to live and dwell among us. The Savior of the world, full of grace and truth who we know as the Light of the World. I could not agree with Moore more. He states, "Christianity is not just a creed we profess or say, Christianity is a lifestyle we live."

Moore continues, "It's not enough to preach faith from our pulpits. It's not enough to sing it in our hymns. It's not enough to talk about it in Sunday School or small groups. Faith is a lifestyle. It's a whole new way of living!" (page 100)

Obviously, James picks up on what Jesus taught him as he writes in James 2:14-17, "What good is it if one claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? What if a person is without clothes or daily food? If we say, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed', but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

What was Wesley's greatest fear for the people called Methodist? What was Jesus' concern with the religious leaders of his day? Is God concerned in any of these ways for us? For you? O, yes!

And this caused Jesus to grieve.

#### **V. A Plow From the Sky**

Christianity is not just about creeds, but about deeds. Moore says, "Christianity is not just about believing, it is also about behaving." (Page 101)

There's a story of a missionary group who felt led by God to go to a remote corner of Africa to set up a Christian mission to serve God and the tribe of people who lived there. The missionaries, uncertain of how they'd be received decided as a sign of good will to get a plane to drop by parachute a bright, shiny new plow as a gift to them.

A few days later, the missionary group came expecting that their gift would make the tribe more receptive to them. Instead, they encountered something they did not expect.

The people of that tribe had never seen a plow before. They had no idea what this strange thing was that had fallen out of the sky. So, not knowing what to do with it, they set it up on a pedestal and were worshipping it.

What we know about the plow is that it was meant to be used to plow up the ground, so seed could be planted so people would have good food to eat leading to a healthier, better quality of life for all. Because the members of the tribe did not know that or were not taught that, they made the plow an ornament rather than a tool! (page 101-102)

#### **VI. Faith on a Pedestal**

Is it possible to do this with our faith? I think so. It's easy to say we have faith. Faith to many can be only an idea of what we believe, a lovely set of ideas—loving God, loving neighbor, loving our enemies, caring for neighbors, tithing, ceremonies of marriage, or burial. How often are our cups clean on the outside, but not on the inside. How often do our tombstones look nice, but inside we are full of dead bones? That's a rough image, but Jesus was not about to let anyone off the hook too easy, especially those who had any sort of influence on others.

How often are our ideas of faith and of holiness laid neatly upon a pedestal rather than being a powerful force designed to transform the ways in which we think, speak, and act? And how does this impact those around us? How does it impact our society?

## VII. I Don't Want to be a Stench

In Disciple Bible Study we learn from the Old Testament that over and over again the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets got angry with the people, kinda like Jesus does. They felt that unless your faith changes your life it is a farce. That unless what you say you believe, which would be your core values, unless this changes your behavior, then you are, we are, like what Jesus calls the Scribes and the Pharisees—hypocrites. We are just in a cosmic drama.

Now if our gathering together to sing, pray, give, and to be inspired thru the written and spoken word is meaningful and we take seriously how we respond to what we hear, and we are serious to take that with us into our daily living in order to produce good fruit and produce righteous living, then that's a good thing.

If, on the other hand, it's for show, if we end up neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness, then it's as the prophets said, "a stench in the nostrils of God". (Is 65:5)

I don't know what you think about that, but being a stench in God's nostrils does not seem to be a good thing. I don't want to be a stench. I hope my behavior lines up with my creeds. I hope and pray what I think, say, and do will, at the end of the day, be a sweet aroma to God. And it we be if my faith and actions match up. The same is true for you.

You know the aroma of that first night in the stable, even with this sweet little Jesus likely was not so sweet. I do wonder what is a sweet aroma we can offer God. Without going into a lot of detail, here are four things Denise Kohlmeyer suggests: Which could or would you be willing to offer to God today?

## VIII. Four Aromas God Loves

1. **Our Prayers** First is the aroma of prayer. Prayer is the #1 way we communicate with God. The Christmas story includes Mary's prayer and Zechariah's prayer. Praising God for God's favor, for God's salvation. God loves our prayers of thanksgiving, for forgiveness, and in our praying for others. Our prayers are a sweet aroma to God and we should come to God believing God hears our prayers and that we will also hear from God and do what God asks us to do. That way our creeds and deeds match. God spoke to Joseph, to Mary, to shepherds, and to wise men, giving them directions in the Christmas story and they all obeyed and followed God.
2. **Our Repentance** Second is our willingness to repent and turn from our ways to God's ways. I believe Jesus was hard on the Pharisees hoping they might stop living by the letter of the law and realize loving God and loving neighbor summed up the law. When we repent that's what cleans the inside of the cup and in the end makes everything more pleasant to the smell.  
It seems it's not enough to worship the baby, it also requires us to repent of our sin and give our hearts to Jesus. That will always be a sweet aroma to God. God doesn't want half-hearted confessions, God desires true repentance. That's what leads to life.
3. **Our Witness** Third is our Witness. People who encountered Jesus in the New Testament often went and told others. Even the shepherds after seeing Jesus "spread the word concerning him" (Luke 2:19) "And all were amazed?" Why even Mary who at his birth "ponders all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:19) when Jesus is older tells a bunch of servers at a wedding where the wine had run out. "Do whatever he tells you!" (John 2:5) Our witness in word and deed is a sweet aroma to God. As Paul says in II Corinthians 2:16-18 "through us (God) spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him..., For we are to God the aroma of Christ to those being saved and those perishing. To one the smell of death, to the other the fragrance of life." Your witness to others of who Jesus is to you is a sweet aroma to God.

- 4. Our Love** Last, is our love for God and each other. Love came down at Christmas to give us the gift of a new way of living. His greatest act of love is when he gave himself, out of love for the world, to die on a cross. Paul describes Jesus' sacrifice as "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God". And as followers of Jesus we are called to do no less. When we love others and think of others and talk to others and serve others as Jesus did for us, that love is a sweet aroma to God.

## **IX Washing the Inside of Our Cups**

Folks how can your and my actions here at Christmas and all year long bear witness to the faith we say we confess and believe? Jesus was born to save us. How can we wash the inside of our cups? How can we have clean and clear hearts and lives this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent in preparing for Christmas Day and truly live out our faith in a way that becomes a sweet aroma to good through our prayers, repentance, witness and love?

What difference would that make for you and others this Christmas?

## **X. Closing Prayer**

Let's Pray:

O God, you offer us all kinds of Christmas gifts which we have been learning about. Today it's about the gift of a new style of living. Talking about gifts of faith, hope, and love is one thing. Living the Jesus way, we are a little wary of that. We know it, we say we believe it, living it out daily, often it's a challenge. So help us, God. Give us strength and courage to live out our faith so it is a sweet aroma to you, God, and therefore to others who then might also be drawn to the manger and ultimately the cross. May our faith be reflected in all our actions and attitudes so our lives indeed give witness to the trust we've placed in your son, our good and faith shepherd, Jesus.

Amen.