



TIME OF GRACE®

Simply Christmas: One Gift Fits All?

Study Notes

Summary

Christmas is a time when families gather, for better or for worse. Tense relationships are revealed. Sins come front and center. Which is what makes Luke 2 so incredible. The shepherds, infamous in the ancient world for their lack of character, are God's first audience for Christmas. Angels bring good news of great joy to take away their fear and welcome them (and us) to the family of God.

- Today's goal: To have a _____ Christmas.
- **Luke 2:8-10:** ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."
- **Luke 2:7:** And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.
- _____ makes Christmas merry.

Points to Ponder

1. Read Luke 1 and compare the angelic visits to Zechariah and Mary. What do they have in common with the shepherds? In their reactions? In their eventual praise?
2. Are you more of a reckless "black sheep" or a rule-keeping "white sheep"? How can both paths backfire when it comes to being happy? How is the presence of a glorious and forgiving God the answer for both?

3. Challenge: Think of some sad or stressed people that you know. Invite them to a Christmas Eve service at your church so they can meet the Savior who can make them eternally happy.

Homework for Next Week

Read Luke 2:11,12.

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

—Jesus, Luke 5:31,32

Time of Grace Ministry
Simply Christmas: One Gift Fits All?

Luke 2:8-12
December 8, 2019

Pastor Mike Novotny

So if you had to describe Christmas with an emoji, which emoji would it be?

I'll give you a couple options. You could choose from stressed, kind of sad, and super happy. If you ask most people in our culture, the ideal answer - what Christmas should be - is actually pretty easy. Out of all the times of the year, all the holidays and all the seasons, this is the time we talk more than any about that last one; about being happy. What would it take for you to have a happy holiday and a merry Christmas? I mean, from Walmart greeters to pastors as you leave church, we're all saying merry Christmas and happy New Year and happy holidays, but if that's going to happen for you, what's it going to take?

I was talking with this fourth grader that I mentor last week and asked him about Christmas and he immediately got sad; like his face moved to the center, if not the left, of those emojis. And I said, "Well, what's up, dude?" And he said, hanging his head, all my presents are too expensive. He wanted an Xbox One X, the brand new version, he wanted a bunch of games and his parents don't have a ton of money; he had a feeling he wasn't going to get the thing that he needed to make him happy. And I was talking to a woman this morning who just looked emotional even as I was talking in church and I found her afterwards and I said, "What's the problem?" and I wasn't aware that there was a separation and an upcoming divorce and our family isn't going to be all together for the first time in a long time; her kids, the man that she loved. And that happens all the time, right? I mean, there are separations, there's divorce, and there's death and the Christmas table isn't what it always used to be.

And so, there's this weird tension, right? Like everyone is telling us to rejoice and to be glad and to be happy and to be joyful but it's not that simple. In fact, it's really hard, if not impossible, for most of us to be totally happy during the holidays.

Unless, you celebrate a classic Christmas. Did you know that if you'd open the pages of your Bible and open up to the longest Christmas story in the gospel of Luke, you would find the Bible actually pushing you to be happy? I mean, Luke chapter one and two are filled with people who are happy and rejoicing and glad and celebrating and spreading the news and they're all kinds of people. They're like single people and engaged people, married people and widowed people; they're Jewish people and Gentile people, they're old, they're young, they're male, they're female. They're devout religious people and they're black sheep in their religious family and yet, in the Bible, all of them end up happy. Not because they had easy lives and not because they got all the presents they wanted on their list but they found out the right place to find guaranteed happiness.

And tonight, that's what I want to share with you. If you actually want to have a merry Christmas and a happy holiday, I want to show you the one place where you are guaranteed to find it. So if you're taking notes in your program, here's our goal for today: I want you to have a

merry Christmas. Even if someone passed away, even if you're alone at the holidays, even if you battle anxiety, I want you to be in the hot pursuit of deep and lasting happiness this Christmas. We're going to search for that answer in just three verses from the gospel of Luke and if you have your Bible with you or just want to follow along on the screen, we're going to start in Luke 2 beginning with verse eight.

Dr. Luke, one of the four biographers of Jesus said this: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." Now if you know the classic Christmas story, these are the shepherds who are about to be insanely happy but I would suggest to you that they weren't at the start of the story. You ever think about the shepherds and how sad and depressing their lives were? If not, just look at this verse. What were they doing? They were living out in the fields. These weren't guys that went home to their nice Sleep Number beds and their comfortable pillow; they slept outside. Do you know how cold it gets in Bethlehem during the winter? About forty degrees. They lived at a time in history when there was not these nice fancy technology sleeping bags to keep you warm. There were no hand warmers or fancy boots. These are guys who are shivering out in the cold and look at what they're doing: Keeping watch over their flocks. You ever watch sheep before? Not the most happy inducing, hey rejoice and dance and be glad occupation in the world. They stared at sheep for a long time. Do you know - I googled this - the average sheep sleeps between three and four hours a night. Apparently, they can't consume enough calories to really like crash like most of us do after Christmas dinner and so they're always up grazing and grazing and grazing and because sheep are completely defenseless - they don't have fangs, they don't have claws, they're not fast, they can't climb trees, they can't swim; like they're totally defenseless - so the shepherd has to stay wide awake to protect them from predators. And so here these shepherds are, shivering cold, watching sheep for 20 to 21 hours a day and that's not the only sad thing about their life. Luke says they were living out in the fields nearby. These weren't in the green pastures of the best parts of America; this was in the Middle East. And it's not like totally desert-covered like you might picture, there are green pastures in the Middle East, but not very often and so these shepherds would have to take their flocks from spot to spot. They were drifters and roamers; they would spend most of their years away from their homes, their families, their friends, and their bed. They had tough, difficult jobs. If you've ever had to work a difficult third-shift in a factory or you ever had to drive truck - not like a local route but around the country where you didn't see the people you love the most for days, if not weeks at a time - that's the kind of lives that these shepherds had; difficult, unhappy lives.

And if some of the rabbis from around the time of Jesus were right, these guys had not just had hard lives; they were actually pretty bad guys. Did you know that many rabbis suggest to us that shepherds were the black sheep of the Jewish family? The rabbis would say that because all this independence and lack of accountability and oversight, that shepherds gave into temptation and became scoundrels in Jewish culture. They would take their flocks and graze them on the private pastures because everyone else was sleeping while they were awake. The rabbis would tell the people in the synagogue never, ever, ever, ever, ever buy a sheep from a shepherd; he probably stole it and if he's selling you the meat, he probably killed a lamb from someone else's flock, sold it in the marketplace, and got out of Dodge before anyone could catch him.

There's one rabbi who came up with a list of the most despised occupations in Israel and guess what was on it? Tax collector, gambler, and shepherd. There's one rabbi who's recorded of being baffled reading the Old Testament in Psalm 23 where King David said the Lord is my shepherd. He said, "Why would you ever compare the Lord to the shepherd?" because all the shepherds that he knew were nothing like the Lord; they were ungodly scoundrels. Shepherds in the first century couldn't testify in court because everyone knew they never told the truth and they couldn't hold civil office because they couldn't be relied upon for anything except for looking out for themselves. Shepherds had difficult, unhappy lives. If the rabbis were right, they were known as notorious sinners.

And it got me thinking about that idea of being the black sheep in a religious family. I did some research and somehow, I ended up on amazon.com ordering a variety pack of sheep's wool. You know, like you do around the Christmastime. Do you know where black sheep come from? There's actually a recessive gene that their white-wooled parents carry and if the genetic combination is right, two white-wooled sheep can produce a black one. But because it's a recessive gene, black sheep immediately stand out in the flock. Like if I showed you a picture of a flock of sheep, I guarantee you could find the black one pretty quickly, right? They don't look like the rest. In addition, because black wool couldn't be dyed for different colors of yarn, many people thought that black sheep were less valuable and inferior compared to the white ones and that's kind of where that idea comes from. Like if a person in a family compared to their parents or grandparents or brothers or sisters, they stand out because of the life that they live and the choices they made, they might be labeled a black sheep. If the way that they spend their time and money, the way that they use their bodies is considered morally inferior or not as good as the other members of the family, they might get that label. And you don't have to raise your hand for this question, but I wonder how many of you are the black sheep in your families? How many of you kind of disappointed your moms, your dads, or your grandparents? How many of you didn't follow the path of college and settling down and having kids like your older siblings? I wonder if any of you ended up on a very, very different path than what mom or dad would have wanted.

Literally, a half hour after thinking through this part of the Bible, I had coffee with a guy and he said to me, "I'm the black sheep in my family." And I said, "You need to come to church next Sunday." And I was thinking about his story and I'm thinking about so many of the stories of people like that and I was wondering how does a person end up as a black sheep? Like why would they choose that path if mom or dad and the brothers and sisters wanted something very different? And there's a pretty general answer - I know there are lots of exceptions - but I wonder if it's this: I wonder if black sheep are just trying to be happy? I wonder if they looked at the lifestyle of their churchgoing parents and their rule-keeping siblings and wondered there's probably a better way to be happy.

Do you know the problem though that black sheep find out sooner or later? Is that breaking the rules doesn't make you happy forever. For a little bit, maybe, but ask the people in rehab if they're happy with their choices. They start out as the people who were pursuing happiness, like as fast as they could get it, but it didn't lead them to the happiest place. Ask the people whose family lives are really complicated because you know they were just going to have sex and have fun and then they got pregnant and that was really difficult and challenging and they love their

kids but it would be so much easier with someone else in the picture. And even if, you know, sin doesn't catch up to you in the short-term, the story of the shepherds reminds us that being a black sheep doesn't work out in the long run. Think about these men as we read our next verse from Luke 2. It says, "An angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord shown around them and they were terrified." Not happy, not joyful, they were terrified. In fact, the gospel of Luke, which was originally written in the Greek language, literally says this: "They feared a fear; a big one." Like these rough and tough country boys who had come face to face with the fangs of a wolf, they soiled their robes when they came face to face with the glory of God. They were not happy when they met God.

And before we figure out why, I need to push "pause" on your brain and I need us quickly to find what that word glory means. It was the glory of the Lord that made them terrified instead of happy but do you know what the word glory means? Like if a kindergartener caught you after church and said, "Hey! You were singing 'gloria.' What does that mean? And then you sang it again, 'gloria,' and then you prayed that prayer for the kingdom and the power and the glory of yours, what's that mean?" What would you say to him? I have a feeling if you're like most church people, glory is one of those short words that we talk about all the time in church but we never define so let me help you. The word glory is used a bunch in the Bible and in a bunch of different ways. Let me give you three examples and see if you can find the common denominator. In Matthew 6, Jesus said that King Solomon, one of the richest kings of the Old Testament, when he walked into the room in his royal robes, it was glorious. Psalm 19 says that the heavens, the starry skies on a dark night, declare the glory of God. And John 12 says that when the prophet Isaiah actually saw Jesus in this incredible vision and he was up on his throne seated there, surrounded by angels, he saw Jesus' glory. So what do those three things have in common? The wardrobe of a king, the beauty of stars on a dark night, and the face of Jesus himself? My one word answer to that question, my personal definition of glory, is this: Whoa. When something is so stunning and jaw dropping and unique and powerful that you just stop, that's glory.

So back to our question - why weren't the shepherds happy to be face to face with the amazing, jaw dropping glory of God? And if you're thinking in your head "Because God is good and they were bad," you'd be right kind of. That's incredible - the angel doesn't even have to say a word and these guys are afraid. There's something about that that when you sin and when you do your own thing in life and God shows up, and he is so good and his presence is so full of power and wonder and glory, you are immediately exposed and ashamed of the choices you made. That for a black sheep who's been getting drunk and getting high and doing whatever they want, to actually be in the presence of God, in an instant we will regret it and be terrified.

Except, not just the black sheep. There's this really, really interesting thing about the gospel of Luke and the way he tells the Christmas story. Luke gives us three examples in the first two chapters of people who came face to face with an angel of God and the glory of God; a guy named Zechariah, a woman named Mary, and this group of shepherds. Zechariah was an old, married man who wanted a baby and the Bible says he worked in the church and he wasn't like a hypocrite or an imposter; he was a blameless, godly, devout man. But when an angel appeared and the glory of the Lord shown around him, do you know how he felt? Terrified. And when Mary, the small town girl who had a sincere faith in her heart, she seemed humble and kind and

godly. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her, do you know one of the first things Gabriel had to say? "Don't be afraid" because she was terrified. Luke, at the very start of his biography of Jesus, is trying to tell you that when God shows up - whether you're a priest, just a humble church girl, or a scoundrel of a shepherd - everyone is terrified. And if you're a rule-keeping, obedient churchgoing person, that's really, really important for you to know, too.

There's a temptation that lots of us church people face and the temptation is to think that "those" people are the problem. You know, "those" people in my family, if they could only behave like me. And America's going down the drain because of "those" people who don't behave like I do and believe what I do. And very quickly, we become self-righteous and judgmental and we look down and we become the religious people that nonreligious people want nothing to do with. But church people, did you know that we actually have the same problem as the black sheep? And the problem is that we're trying to be happy but not through the presence of God. If I had to say that the biggest sin that I see in the members of our church is not drunkenness or gossip or pride; the biggest sin that I think that we struggle with is that we're not that happy. Like if we're the people that know God, we're with God, and it doesn't make us that happy, like what's up with our hearts? Like if we go to church and we're trying to drag our kids and our grandkids and our brothers and sisters with us and we don't come home with a smile on our face, why, why would they even want to come? If we know the Ten Commandments and we try really hard to keep the rules but we can't rejoice while doing it, why would anyone follow our example? And if you know what the name Immanuel means in Hebrew, God with us, and you can say it without a smile on your face - God is with us - the biggest problem with the Christian life is not committing adultery or getting drunk; it's to actually be in the presence of God and not be that happy about it. The problem many Christians face is not that we yell at God's rules; it's that somehow, unbelievably, we yawn at God's glory. And that's what we need to think about very, very deeply. Christianity is not about keeping rules; it's about getting to God. Christianity is about finding a deep and lasting happiness because Jesus opens the door to the glorious presence of God where we can rejoice always. And there are two paths to miss it: The rebellious and the religious; the prodigal and the Pharisee. I'm going to leave God behind to do something he says is wrong or I'm going to do the things that God says is right but I'm going to forget about his glory.

I saw this really disturbing video on YouTube the other day. It's something that I think would never ever happen in America. There's apparently some tourist attraction in China where they drive this tour bus and they park it right in the middle of this tiger sanctuary and there are dozens of big, beautiful, striped tigers just roaming around the premises. And then the company who runs the place, they bring in a dump truck and they park it just a few feet from the tour bus and boom, the back of the truck starts to go up and that's when you see from the phones inside the tourist bus that there's a sheep in the back of the dump truck. As the thing goes up, the tigers get the scent of it and they start to prowl and come towards the back of the truck and the sheep is holding on for dear life but eventually, the gravity gets to him - whoosh - he hits the dirt and you want to guess what happens? He dies. And do you know what color his wool was? Doesn't matter.

See, there might be a black sheep in your family but all sheep are defenseless. Not a single sheep can stand face to face with a wolf and survive. And so whatever your story is - if it's

reckless, far from church, far from God, or if you've been here Sunday after Sunday - all of us actually have the same problem. And by the grace of God, all of us have the same solution. Probably the most important verse of the Christmas story is what we're going to find next in Luke's gospel. Look at this incredible, happy-inducing news that we find in verse 10: "But the angel said to the shepherds, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.'" All the people. For sinners who have been reckless and black sheep, this is for you. For those of you who just got out of jail, this is for you. For those of you who don't have a one week chip in your pocket, this is for you. For those of you who are religious and a little bit too uptight, this is for you. For those of you who believe in Jesus but you're not yet smiling about it, this is for you. For the gossips and the proud, the controlling and the addicts, this is for all the people. It doesn't matter who you are, this is the message for you, which is incredibly good news. Like if you are a Bible believing, gracing, church attending, white sheep in the family, this is for you. And if you're a shot taking, pot smoking, church skipping guy who somehow ended up in church today, this is for you, too. We all have the same problem and we all get the same amazing news. And you know what the news is, right?

Luke already told us in verse seven - remember this verse? "Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guestroom available for them." That Jesus was born not for some people but for all people. As the Bible beautifully says, "God so loved the world," and that includes you no matter what your story. "That whoever," - love that word - "whoever would believe in Jesus would not perish but have eternal life." Like unending happiness in the presence of God, in his glory, be amazed at him and not terrified and it's all because of Jesus. And if you keep your eyes fixed on that fact, that there is a Jesus that came into this world for you, no matter who you are, to bring you into the presence of God forever and nothing can touch it. That is the source of happiness.

Right down the answer to our pursuit of happiness: It is Christ that makes Christmas merry. It is focusing on Jesus and who he is and what he did that allows us to rejoice and be glad and sing our Glorias to God. And I say that to you because I know the rest of the story. Let me show you a picture and see if you can identify what this is. Anyone know what that is? That's a manger. I took this picture myself in the city of Megiddo in central Israel and according to our tour guide, this is how many mangers in the ancient world looked. Manger actually comes from the Latin word "mangerie," which means to chew because a manger is a place where animals would chew on hay and their feed to stay alive and because animals would slobber, like many of your dogs do, if a manger's made out of wood, it would rot really quickly. And so if you could afford it, you'd chisel out a stone manger and that's the place where Mary put Jesus. Which, if you think about it, is really good news because God shows up on earth and where does he show up? His body is laid in an uncomfortable place where little bits of hay pierce his innocent skin and the spit of animals touches his holy head. And it might sound like a sad start to the story of Jesus but actually, it is the reason we love being Christians. Because when this God showed up in glory, he didn't come like Solomon in royal robes, proud and exalted. He humbled himself for us. And 33 years after he was born, Jesus would repeat this humble miracle. His body would be placed in another uncomfortable place called the cross where not little bits of hay but splinters of wood would pierce his skin and nails would pierce his hands and feet. Where the spit of animals - not donkeys and sheep and cows - but the spit of the Roman soldiers would touch his holy head and he wouldn't regret it; he would choose it because he wanted to bring you back to God. He

wanted to make sure that no matter what kind of sin you struggle with, no matter how ugly your story, whether you're surprised the church didn't burn down when you walked in it, no matter what happens, no matter what is happening, that he would humble himself and die for you so that God could look at you and be pleased. So that God wouldn't be disappointed. So God could send a messenger to you - maybe not an angel; maybe just a grandparent, a pastor, a friend - and they'd say, "Don't be afraid. God's not here to get you back but to give you peace."

This is the good news of the Christmas season; that God will be with you. That if you trust in Jesus, it doesn't matter if everyone shows up and you get all the gifts on your list, God will be with you. And you might get the Xbox One or you might not. You might sit in your room but do you know who's in that room? God. And your kids and grandkids might all show up for the Christmas feast or you might be all alone but do you know who will be in that room with you? God. And you might miss your mom or your husband or your older brother but do you know who's going to sit right next to you this Christmas? God. And in case you haven't heard, this God is glorious. I mean, come on, grandparents, let's use our faith and our logic for a second. If those little kids can make you so happy when they toddle through your front door, they're kids, they drool and poop, I'm talking about God and he's going to be with you. And, you know, if that significant other is there and he proposed or she wanted to date you, oh, what an amazing Christmas it would be, right? That's a person; I'm talking about God! I mean, God who created people and stars in the Grand Canyon, that glorious God because the love of Jesus Christ, he's going to be with you. And so when the music is on and the sweaters are on and the party starts, I want you just to stop and think because of Jesus, God is with us. And if you sit down in a dump apartment with a Salisbury steak and a plastic tray watching some old show by yourself, do you know who's in that room? God. And the people who pursue happiness in this room have nothing because you have God and his mercy and love endures forever. So rejoice this Christmas; not because life is easy or perfect but because of Jesus. God is with you.

Let's pray. Father, unless you wow us, the gospel will mean nothing. Unless we realize that your presence is the key to this untouchable happiness, then the sacrifice of Jesus to get us into your presence will mean so little. And so, we need your Holy Spirit today to open our eyes to remember and to think deeply that all the good things in life are nothing compared to the great person that you are. And so, I pray that your presence would be the deepest desire of our heart. I pray that the thought of you would be so glorious and so much better that the things of this world would pale in comparison. And I pray, God, that once we realize how great you are, that we'd remember because of Jesus, you are ours and you're with us.

I pray today, God, for everyone who's going to have a difficult Christmas by earthly standards or for those who have lost a job and don't have enough money. For those who've suffered a separation, a death, or divorce. For those, God, whose lives are complicated, those battling addiction and mental illness and those who are just going through the motions and they don't know why. I pray for them this year, God, that you would open their eyes to see and to know and to worship you well.

And I pray, God, for us; that somehow despite all the ups and downs of our lives, we'd be really happy people. Like the apostle Paul, we could rejoice in you always and learn the secret of being truly content. God, open doors for us to preach good news, to evangelize this Christmas, as

people wonder why we're smiling and we can tell them because we have you. Not because we're good but because Jesus is.

So God, let this Christmas be incredible for us and for our community, that we could sing gloria, that you wow us as an incredible deal and you're ours because of Jesus. It's in his name that we pray all these wonderful things, Amen.