

## "Can You Gift-Wrap a Reflection?"

Christmas is full of surprises. We enjoy sneaking around to buy the presents and then hiding the gifts from each other until we can wrap them. Nothing is so much fun as planning a surprise for someone you love, and a gift is a tangible surprise that will last. We are willing to make sacrifices in time and money seeking those tangible surprises. It's part of the Christmas tradition, after all, gift-giving and gift-receiving.

For most of us, that is only *one* element of the Christmas season. We enjoy the Christmas music, the Christmas specials on television, and the decorations. And for most of us it is even more than that. We will worship; we will hear the Christmas story and try to *find* something new or *remember* something from our past. We will sing the carols with joy and nostalgia. We will visit friends and family and probably eat too much. And yes, we will give and receive brightly colored packages that have preoccupied us for weeks.

Sometimes though, quite different scenes are part of the Christmas tradition. Often nice, civilized, even *Christian* people enact them. Do you ever hear *these* kinds of conversations?

"Time is growing short. I'll *never* be ready in time. I still have to buy presents for ten more people, send out the Christmas cards, do the baking and cleaning before the company comes. Sometimes I just *dread* Christmas."

Frustration, frenzy, callousness, disappointment, and *enormous* excess have somehow encroached on the holy day. They have become habits, *bad* habits muddled together with good ones.

We say, "Christmas has become so commercialized," and that is true. We seek to blame the media, the advertisers, the merchants, anybody but ourselves, because we are guilty of buying into the commercialization of Christmas too. For many of us, the month zooms by, because we are going to parties, doing last minute shopping in crowded stores, and attending school programs. Yet we hurry, we fuss, and we say we won't do it this way next year. But the next year rolls around, and it is the same song, second verse. The avalanche of advertising beginning in late summer and the extravaganza of holiday merchandise on display seems to push us far from the heart and meaning of the *first* Christmas. And when it comes to our personal schedule, we wonder what we can do without, so we repeat our same routine year after year, sometime begrudgingly, sometime joyously. Yet the bottom line is that giving and generosity should be *hallmarks* of God's great gift to us.

Imagine! God sent that gift to a world that was undeserving, not particularly interested, and unprepared to reciprocate. Out of love, God gave this perfect gift to a world that was *imperfect*. It was simply given--out of love, because we needed it. From this great act has grown the act of gift giving, resulting at last in this stunning collection of use and abuse of what we call Christmas. To me it is sad to hear such a commentary on our society. We have forgotten the true reason of Christmas. Our habits around this time of year often stray from the original intent of the first gift of Christmas, the gift of God's Son into the world.

What should we *ask* ourselves? Are the things we are giving *true* Christmas gifts, or are they something else? A *true* Christmas gift, meaning one that is different from a gift for another occasion, should *reflect* what Christmas teaches about *gifts*. The verse read at the Advent Candle was described by Paul as the *first* Christmas gift. That gift is a *model* for us. Nothing we give *to* or receive *from* others can be even a faint imitation of such lavishness. But the *nature* of the giving can be emulated.

The dictionary defines "gift" as "something given voluntarily without charge." From this, we can also easily see what a gift is *not*. It is *not* a reward for good behavior, and all those department store Santas who ask, "Have you been good?" *before* they make their promises are doing us a disservice. A gift is *not* a human incentive plan. A gift is *not* an empty gesture, given as a formality, or because it is expected. A gift is *not* an atonement for failure. A gift is *not* a way to purchase love or

favor. A gift is *not* valued by quantity or cost. Most of us would have to confess that we have fallen into the snare of supposedly giving *Christmas* gifts when instead we were doing something else. All these views of gift-giving point away from a true *Christmas* gift.

The late journalist, Sydney Harris, once commented about the over-commercialization of Christmas: "It is not the impious and unbelievers who must be on guard . . . it is the believers. It is easy to *think* Christmas and to *believe* Christmas, but it is hard--sometimes very hard--to *act* Christmas." (<http://www.resonate.ca/2004/12/>)

To *act* Christmas--what a concept. What a lofty goal! Can our gift-giving *say* something true, *reflect* something real? Can we gift-wrap a reflection? When we give a gift to someone, can we do so in the *true* spirit of Christmas? Can we take charge of this unruly set of traditions to which we are heirs and improve them?

Ours is a society chock-full of materialism, which is perhaps most evident in the Christmas season. We can go with the flow, *over*-spending and *under*-thinking ourselves into exhaustion and disillusion until Christmas seems either empty or forbidding, or perhaps, deceptively glorious for the wonder of what *we* have done. Or we can dig in our heels and rebel against the whole process as a corruption. Neither extreme will say what a Christian should want to say about Christmas.

Instead, maybe we should seek to realize that the heart of the matter is how we think and feel about *real* Christmas. What is *our* attitude, *first* toward God's gift to us, and *then* toward those with whom we observe and honor that gift? The challenge is to find a way to be true to the spirit of the *first* Christmas, then to seek ways to *reflect* its wonderful meaning in our planning and shopping *and* under our trees.

"Be sure Jesus shows" is not just good advice when we set up our nativity scenes, but in all our preparing and celebrating. Christmas generosity as a *custom* is nothing special, but as an *attitude*, it is significant. Gifts to the poor and to missions, gifts under the tree, or anywhere else will cast reflections. Can you gift-wrap a reflection? Sure you can. Give because God gives, and love because God loves. During this Christmas season, what will your gifts reflect?