

growing further

Christmas Is... For Everyone

"Christmas Is..." Week 5

Rick Long

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*"I have seen the Savior you have given to all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations."
Luke 2:25 (NIV)*

Christmas is the celebration of the coming of Jesus from God in heaven. Jesus came because God loves us. In fact, He loves everyone on the earth who has ever lived. His love is unconditional and His free gift of grace is unconditional too. As our creator, God has continued to be intimately involved with each one of us. He desires the very best for us. That "best" is enjoying an eternity with Him, in a perfect place, where there is no longer pain or suffering, but love and trust and joy. The following discussion will look at what God's gifts are to all people, those gifts given out of his love for you and everyone.

OPEN YOUR GROUP WITH A PRAYER. THIS IS ONLY A GUIDE – SELECT THE POINTS YOU WANT TO DISCUSS.

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil
and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous"
Matthew 5:43-45 (NIV)*

1. According to this passage, what is the reason that we should pray for our enemies? What do you think this means? Why do you think he talks about the rain falling on the righteous and unrighteous? What are some ways that God blesses all people – the good, the bad, and the ugly? Have the members of your group share ways in which God blessed them even before they became believers.

*"The mountains and hills may crumble, but my love for you will never end;
so says the Lord who loves you."
Isaiah 54:10*

2. You cannot make God stop loving you! However, he does care that you do the right thing. Explain what you think is the difference between love and approval, and what does that mean to you personally? How do you know God loves you? How would you respond to the idea that God loved Adolph Hitler as much as He loves you? If this is true, what does it say about God?

*"You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears..."
Psalm 56:8 (NLT)*

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3. God shares the pain of all people - he is not aloof. He understands because he created you! Jesus understands your pain because he, too, suffered. The Holy Spirit understands. He turns your groans into prayer. If you feel comfortable, share with the group when you were aware that God heard and understood your physical, spiritual or emotional pain or suffering.

**“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people”
Luke 2:9-10 (NIV)**

4. Christmas should be a season of joy for all believers because it is when God sent His Son into the world in order to die for us. Joy is understanding and believing that no matter what is happening right now, God is in control, He has our back, and will use what we are going through for our good. Pastor Rick spoke about how God takes pleasure in our joy. What are the things he said should fill us with joy? What is the difference between joy and happiness? Can you have joy without happiness? How?

MAKING IT PRACTICAL (OPTIONAL)

Below are some practical exercises that your group could incorporate as a means of developing love in their lives.

Level 1 Challenge: Think about the things in your life that you do not consider to be good things. What are some things you could start doing that would cause you to look at these circumstances with an attitude of joy? Share these things with the group.

Level 2 Challenge: Write down the names of some people that, maybe you do not view them as enemies (maybe you do), but you do view them as people that you do not really care for. Begin praying for them that God would: Use you to bring the Gospel to them if they are not believers; use you to bless their lives, since God loves them as much as you. Then decide on an action you can take to do these things.

Level 3 Challenge: As a group talk about some of the ways God blesses everyone in the world and how you as a group can be a blessing to others. Build an action plan, including a timeline, to make one of these ideas a reality.

SERMON DISCUSSION LEADER NOTES

Suggestions for This Week's Study

- Help your members see and understand that God loves everyone equally, from Mother Theresa to Adolph Hitler and that this is one of the blessings from God that He gives to all of the people He created.
- Help your members to understand the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is a feeling that comes from pleasant circumstances, but joy comes from knowing and believing that God not only loves you, but that He will only allow into your life that which will be the best for you.
- As a group sing some Christmas Carols together.

PREPARING TO LEAD YOUR GROUP

1. PRAY for insight as you begin to prepare for leading your group. Ask for God's wisdom, that the Holy Spirit will be the teacher and that you will be God's instrument to lead the group to greater understanding and a willingness to commit to becoming more like God. Prayer should be your primary source of personal preparation for leading your group.

2. PLAN where you want to take your group in the next 60-90 days. Is your group strong in some areas and weak in others? How can you challenge the members to live more balanced Christian lives? Consider God's five purposes for the church: Glorify God, Relate to Everyone, Act Like Jesus, Care for Everyone, Express God's Love and make a plan to encourage your members to growth and commitment in their weak areas.

3. PONDER YOUR PROGRESS after each session and at the end of a series. Reflect on what went well and what didn't. Re-evaluation is key to your growth as a leader. Consider whether your plan is being effective in moving the group to greater understanding and commitment.

USING THIS SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Going Further is a tool to aid you in meeting the needs of your group. We've designed it so it can be completed easily within 30-45 minutes. As the discussion leader, you should preview and evaluate the questions based on the needs of your group. Decide in advance what is more important to focus on, should time not allow for the entire lesson.

2. Feel free to adapt the format to meet the needs of your group.

3. Personal applications are essential for growth and should be included in every discussion. When discussing how they will apply principles, group members may state very general goals such as "I need to spend more time in prayer." It is important for you to help people make goals that are very specific and commit to specific plans of action by asking, for example, "How are you going to begin?" An example is to get up 25 minutes earlier each morning, spending 15 minutes reading the Bible and 10 minutes in prayer. Encourage each group member to be accountable to the group for personal progress at the next meeting.

4. Your goal as the leader is to bring the group into a stimulating discussion that helps the members recognize their needs for personal life change. Ultimately you want them to be willing to commit to change with accountability to the group. Accountability helps us to persevere in our commitments and achieve the blessings of success.