

Russell Kelfer
**Making
the Most
of Christmas**

171-A

Series: Miscellaneous Messages

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Making the Most of Christmas

Christmas is coming! What excitement; what joys!
A time for carols; A time for toys!
I'll charge on my card the bills I can't pay
And expect to be broke by New Year's day!

But it's also the time of my Master's birth,
When God humbled Himself and came to earth;
So, there must be an answer. Don't you agree?
How can we make Christmas what God meant it to be?

What a barrage of mixed emotions Christmas brings even to the Christian!

On the one hand, there's the pressure of *decisions*. Do we buy Uncle Harry a blue tie or a grey tie? Does Aunt Anna really want another subscription to Good Housekeeping? Did we buy Susie one more present than we did Benny? Did we spend more money on *her* parents than we did on *mine*? Do we buy a tree to fit the room? Or build a new room to fit the tree? *Decisions!*

But contrast these pressures with the joy of giving to someone you love, someone you wish all year you could do something for; and now the grin on their face or the tears in their eyes say, "This is it." And you feel ten feet tall—a mixture of emotions.

There's the pressure of *financial strain*. You destroy an already non-existent budget. And rather than appear as though you don't care for someone, you compound your own personal version of the federal deficit. Only you can't just raise taxes to pay for it. So you *do* pay for it on into June.

But contrast that with the joys of hearing from old friends; friends you would have lost track of from years gone by were it not for the age-old tradition of Christmas cards. And notes from bygone days trigger memories, memories of family and friends alike.

Then there's the pressure of *time!* The stores are so crowded, that you need to hire someone to block for you so you can make

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it to the toy department. Your schedule's just as crowded. Every year you plan to finish by mid-December only to find yourself again on Christmas Eve running frantically to drug stores or half-empty discount houses to pick up those 30 items you never got around to. Every year you visualize the tree trimmed by early December and all the packages neatly wrapped and labeled by the 15th so you can ride around and enjoy the lights or drive leisurely to the church around the corner for their Christmas cantata, only to find yourself in this familiar setting on December 24th at midnight:

Dad is in one bedroom with wrapping paper strewn from one end of the room to the other, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Susie, when will you finish with the Scotch tape?" And mother's mumbling, "This package needs a purple polka dot bow. There just aren't any purple polka dot bows this year." Finally, everyone falls into bed at 2 A.M. exhausted and harried, counting the minutes till little Bobbie's automatic alarm bell goes off, when you, clad in bathrobes with tooth-picked eyes, paint on your Christmas grin and head for tree time! We feel the pressure of *time* at Christmas.

But contrast that with the blessings of remembrances of Christmases past. Johnny's first Christmas. Susie's first bike. Mary's first doll. And it all seems to be worthwhile.

So Christmas is packed with pressures:

The pressures of decisions.

The pressures of finances.

The pressures of time.

But oh the joys of giving.

The joys of old acquaintances.

The joys of fond memories.

If only we could turn Christmas into something more; something that is truly spiritually significant!

Almost from mid-September now, the commercial aspects of Christmas begin to make their way into our homes; Christmas catalogs filled with brightly colored bargains fill the mailbox to overflowing. Christmas decorations, mildly festive before Thanksgiving, thereafter, ranging from tasteful reminders to gaudy commercialism. By mid-December the daily newspaper is one big Christmas ad. Television commercials take Polaroid pictures on Christmas morning, smell new perfumes by the tree,

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grind up vegetables, and gallop through the snow for a certain brand of liquid refreshment. And computerized robots staring like zombies talk to you through pre-programmed electronic cartridges.

For many the rush turns to a frenzy. The desire to give as an expression of love turns into a mad rush to do more for Aunt Hilda because she sent each of the kids *two things*. And the whole thing loses its perspective.

For some, the frenzy is offset with Christian fellowships, carols sung by the fire, the re-re-reading of the Story of Stories, “And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin...”

But we leave even *these* times torn between the world’s demands to buy things you don’t need with money you don’t have to give to people who don’t need them; and God’s prompting to give to the needy, support Christian missionaries, and quote “put Christ back in Christmas”.

At one extreme are those who will not buy a tree and flinch at all the pagan symbolism. At the other are those who can’t whip ‘em so they join ‘em.

I simply would like to remind you today of some ideas on how to make the “spiritual switch”; how to enjoy Christmas without the sourpuss routine, but making it nonetheless spiritually meaningful. Our goal then is “Making the Most out of Christmas,”

I- MAKING THE MOST OF THE WORLD’S CHRISTMAS STORY

The problem is always there! We are to live in the world, but we are not to be conformed to the world. Now the word “conformed” means *to be put into a mold and reshaped by the structure of that mold*. Where Christmas is concerned, the world’s goals are physical, commercial, and totally inconsistent with God’s. But the Christian *can* participate with *different* motives; with *different* goals. He need not be contaminated, nor conformed, but rather he can be confident and creative in his celebration of Christmas.

Christians! You and I ought to have a ball at Christmas. We’re the only ones who really have a reason to! We ought to enjoy the tree, the decorations, the presents, the atmosphere. We ought to more than *endure* it. We ought to enjoy it, and communicate the joy through it that only a Christian can have! For the Christian,

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Christmas never ends! So when the world pauses to acknowledge (even wrongfully) the birth of our Savior, ought not our joy to surpass theirs? We don't have to join 'em to join in.



The Significance of Symbols

The truth of it all surfaces in all its splendor when we go beyond the *mere acceptance* of the world's philosophy of Christmas, and begin to *enjoy Christmas* without fear of contamination by its worldliness; when we come to the place where we can make the "spiritual switch", and actually *use those very pagan customs and symbols to teach spiritual truth*. Then it becomes an adventure! Then the Christian can be positive, creative, and instructive. And these principles will apply no matter how old the children are, or even if there *are no children in the family*.

Here is what I mean: You can sit the family or friends down on Christmas Eve and ask some questions, leading into a discussion of how great our God is, and how much He loves us. Or you can take several evenings before Christmas so you can be even more creative. Why not begin with the Christmas tree and all its decorations and see *what they say about Jesus?*

Remember! You are limited only by your willingness to be creative in the Spirit. But here are a few suggestions of how the decorations of Christmas can speak to you:

1- The Christmas Tree

Given a chance, the tree will speak to you of Calvary. You can use that tree to remind yourself of "He who bore our sins in His own body on that tree that we, being dead to sin, might live unto righteousness." Remember; the real Christmas story centers around a tree, too. Jesus was born that He might die. He had to die on that tree that we might be born and experience Christmas! So the tree speaks of the message of Christmas. I know, some of you can find verses that say "decorated trees were used for pagan purposes." I can find them, too. But so were cattle. Are you going to stop eating meat? So was water. Are you going to stop drinking water? It's not the tree...it's the eyes that behold the tree that

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determine whether or not it is good; and to the Christian, the tree can be a source of rejoicing. You can even stop and remind yourself that only God can make a tree. That, too, is a source of rejoicing.

2- Look at the lights!

The lights speak, too...and they say..."I am the light of the world". Take your family into a room with no lights on...but those on the tree and behold it's beauty. Then unplug the tree! And demonstrate...that's what life would be like without Christ...total darkness! And that's what the world would be like if there had been no Christmas! ...Or show them how the lights are placed in different places; put there strategically by your sovereign choice so there would be no place on the tree where there was no light. Then you can make the "spiritual switch", and show them how a sovereign God has placed *us* in our neighborhoods; in our jobs; in our classrooms. You can say "here's daddy at his job; here's mom at home; you at school."

It will demonstrate how God has placed *us* where we need to be to "let our lights so shine before men".

3- The Greenery.

The greenery over the doors, on the mantle, on the table speaks too. It speaks of growth. It speaks of the process of nurturing, watering, sunlight. It speaks of the procedure and of the patience. Ask the children if they know how long it takes to grow a tree. Ask them if they would like to be one. Then show them in Psalm one that they are like a "tree, planted by rivers of living water".

Show them how *this greenery* will soon lose it's vitality because it has been separated...cut off from it's source of strength...the tree. Then teach them the lesson of the vine and the branches from John 15.

4- The Snow speaks, too.

It speaks of God's purity and righteousness! It speaks of the Word of God as Isaiah reminded us, "As the snow cometh down and the rain from heaven," so God's Word will not return unto Him void. The snow melts, but it doesn't vanish. It goes into the ground and produces life, just as the Word does when it is memorized and laid up in the heart!

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5- The ornaments.

The ornaments, how they speak! They speak of the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. And the ornaments, remember, only *reflect* light, just as we but *reflect* the character of God.

So you can make ornaments of each of the character qualities: faithfulness, sensitivity, diligence, contentment. Let each family member hang a different one and let them share what that quality means to them with the rest of the family as they hang it on the tree!

The tinsel speaks of the glitter of the world that will not last. Like the world, it passes away. And the star at the top speaks of the glory of God that points men to Christ. Or your tree may be topped by an angel, and you can teach the family of the angelic host, and with them gather round to sing praises to the King of Kings.

You can make your own ornament for the top and let it speak a special message of life to your family or friends. When you make the spiritual switch, even the wall plug speaks! Unplug it! Explain the “Calvary connection”, and how you can receive power (John 1:12). “As many as received Him, to them gave He the power to become sons of God, even to them that believe on His name!” The fuse in the line or the breaker on the wall speak of I John 1:9. Surges of sin blow the fuse, short out the circuits, and the power is lost. Oh, the power is still there; it’s just not usable. But “if we confess our sins, He is faithful”, and you can throw the switch and show them how the power is restored again!

So the tree can speak of God’s love.

The snow of His holiness and His Word.

The ornaments of His character.

The lights of His message.

The plug of His power.

The fuse of His forgiveness.

What tools to teach the miracles of truth!

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The Portrait of Gifts

But the gifts beneath the tree are even a better teaching tool. Here are at least three possibilities:

1 - Fruits of the Spirit.

One way you can let the gifts speak is by wrapping nine different packages beneath the tree and in each one place a piece of fruit representing one of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control. As you open them, you can define each one, and give illustrations of each one. You can open one each day for ten days, or two a day for five days, and as you explain what supernatural gifts those character qualities are, you can explain that only God can give them.

2 - Gifts of the Spirit.

If your children are older, use this as a time to teach them about the *spiritual gifts*. You might take seven packages and wrap each of them and inside put a card with one of the spiritual gifts: mercy, prophecy, giving, exhortation, administration, service, teaching. Open 1, 2, or 3 a week and share with them the qualities and ministries that each gift produces. Maybe show a picture of someone they know with that gift. Then use the lights again to show them how God places the gifts in the body of Christ for balance.

3 - God's Inheritance Gifts.

A third way is to wrap different gifts and place them under the tree representing the spiritual things God has given his children. You might put a tag on each that says something like this: "Every good and acceptable gift comes from God." Here are some possibilities:

a) A box marked "Eternal Life". When they open it, it can have John 3:16 written on a card, or it can hold a birth certificate you have made out, with their name on it, and the date they received Christ.

b) A box marked "Inheritances". Inside there can be a will;

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a scroll listing the inheritances that have been left to them now that they are “joint heirs” with Christ, and you can include I Peter 1:4 and 5, which tells how that inheritance is “incorruptible, and undefiled, and fadeth not away”.

c) You can mark one “Your Home in Heaven”, It can include a picture of a mansion, and it can include a quote from John 14 about the mansion in Heaven that awaits them, even now.

d) If you want to be really honest, they can open another marked “Tribulation”, and it can have an umbrella inside, and the verse “in this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

e) Then of course, there is the gift of “His Word.” It can have a new Bible inside, and a love letter, showing them that the Bible is a love letter from God to them.

f) Then there can be a gift marked “The Privilege of Prayer”.

It can have a toy telephone inside (these days you can buy a real one for less than a toy), and it can be to show them that we *always have the privilege of communicating with God, just by calling...and He will answer.*

g) “The Great Commission” is a gift too. Matthew 28:19,20 can be written over a map of the world showing missionaries they can pray for through that year.

One can even have a doll or a picture of a person along with the Scripture: “Ask of Me and I shall give thee people for Thy life,” and an explanation of how God will give people in exchange for their lives if they will make people the *object* of their lives.

These are but a few ideas of how to make the “spiritual switch”. You take it from there. You can use the reindeer, the wreaths, the chimney, the outside lights. Ask God for the creativity to turn *everything you see into a message.* And He will!!

II- MAKING THE MOST OF GOD’S CHRISTMAS STORY

You can do the same thing with the *REAL* Christmas story. You can relate Christ being born physically to our being born spiritually. There are so many truths in the Christmas story.

You can show others that people still find Jesus as they did years ago. Ask them “Where were Mary and Joseph when Jesus came?” They were obeying those in authority. “The decree went

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out from Caesar Augustus that all the world would be taxed.” So Mary and Joseph went to be taxed. (They were WALKING.)

The Shepherds found Him *where they were*. They were about their work, tending the flocks by night. (They were WATCHING.)

The angels were adoring the Father. (They were WORSHIPPING.)

Simeon was in church. (He was WAITING.)

The wise men were studying and searching.
(They were WONDERING.)

Then Jesus came! And none of them were ever the same again!

III- MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR CHRISTMAS STORY!

But what is most important of all, I believe, is your ability to translate *the* Christmas story into *your* Christmas story, thus using the greatest teaching aid of all, your life.

I John 1:3 says this,

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you.

Just as Joshua built an altar with stones, and then said: “When your children ask you in time to come: ‘What mean ye by these stones?’ ye shall say unto them! “so glad you asked!” Use Christmas as an opportunity to share the story of how you were born again.

The real message of Christmas is the message of BIRTH.

Birth is “the supernatural bringing forth of life by a sovereign God.” You can use it in a stair-step fashion!

- First the miracle of birth itself (physical birth).
- Then the miracle of the virgin birth.
- Then the miracle of the second birth.
- And finally the miracle of *your* re-birth when Jesus came into your heart.

It all depends on the age of your children, but there’s a message in:

The miracle of PHYSICAL BIRTH

Look at the parallels between physical birth and spiritual birth.

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1- Consider the odds and the Sovereignty of God.

a- From God's perspective, birth is never by accident. Study how God opens the womb, and closes the womb. He has the master key.

b- Study how life always reproduces after its own kind. No man every spawned a giraffe, no fish an eagle.

c- Remind them of the odds: Some 200-400 million sperm at a time. Only one can fertilize the egg. If they are old enough, discuss how it must conquer obstacles of distance, competition, acid environment, penetration of the egg cell, and time (It has only 24 hours).

2- Consider the providing of every detail.

The Chinese consider a newborn to be one year old. It has lived 266 days in the womb. Consider that a single fertilized egg cell becomes a complex organization of 200 million cells increasing in its original weight a billion fold; how God knits together in the mother's womb eyes, spine, nerves, thryoid, lungs; how in three and a half weeks, the embryo becomes a child 1/10 of an inch long.

3- Consider the reality that accompanies its realization.

a- The mother's pain. (Genesis 3:16 - a reminder of sin)

b- The first trauma

c- Period of immunity

4- Consider the process and provision to follow.

a- Natural thirst for milk.

b- Need and provision for love.

c- Need and provision for discipline.

d- Progressive nature of growth.

Show them how as in the physical realm, even in the spritual realm, you can't skip stages. There is the:

Intensive care stage- Protected from without, nurtured from within.

Nursery stage- Provided care and feeding. Slight exposure to others.

Toddler stage- Learning reality of the walk (with lots of help)!

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Pre-teen stage- Learning the basics; testing reality.

Teenage stage- Experiencing reality; appropriating truth.

Young adulthood- Training for parenthood; using their gifts.

Adulthood- Bringing children into the world; taking them through the process of growth.

Senior citizenship- Enjoying the fruits of life and observing them in offspring, while continuing to train and discipline and love.

And Christmas, logically, becomes the time to share *the miracle of the second birth*.

1- It is obviously the perfect time to teach “The gospel according to Nicodemus” You remember the story; it’s found in John 3. Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus by night; and like so many, he said “Jesus, I accept your teachings; they have come from God; Jesus I accept your miracles, they have come from God. Jesus, this is neat, I’d like to follow your teachings, too.” Jesus looked at him and said, “No, Nick, you must be born from above—in the spirit—or you cannot see my kingdom.” What better time than Christmas to explain to those you love the miracle of the *second birth* that made the birth of Christ necessary. What better time than Christmas, indeed.

The miracle according to you.

Finally, what better time than Christmas, to celebrate and demonstrate what Christmas has *really happened to you*.

I believe the most exciting thing about Christmas is the opportunity to use it as THE day to celebrate Christ being born in you! Your spiritual birthday! Perhaps a handful of you celebrate your spiritual birthday on the day it happened. (July 6, May 13, etc.) But most of us don’t. I believe the most moving thing a family can do is have a birthday party and celebrate by candles—not chronological age (no cake is big enough!) but the number of Christmases since Christ was born in you. What an opportunity to share your testimony with your friends.

There are so many ways to do it! Have a birthday party Christmas Eve and have a cake for Jesus. Sing Happy Birthday to each member who is a Christian. Send birthday cards to the Christians in your family instead of Christmas cards. Give special

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gifts at Christmas wrapped in birthday paper in honor of the real meaning of Christmas.

Birthdays in Scripture were celebrated by royalty. You're a child of the King. Have a "royal" birthday celebration.

And what a special Christmas this can be for those who have seen Christ born again in their hearts this past year. Their first spiritual birthday—isn't it natural to celebrate it on *His* day?

They have new life, so the tree has new meaning.

They have new light, so the lights have new meaning.

They have new power, a new gift.

What a Merry Christmas this will be, for them, for us!

In closing, the purpose of this study has simply been to remind each of us of the *real meaning of Christmas*, and to remind each of us that though the world celebrates a *different kind of Christmas*, you and I can take *the very things they have devised as substitutes for reality*, and turn *those things* into literal, visible demonstrations of the spiritual truths that Christmas was really intended to teach. In other words, you and I need not become Spiritual Scrooges, using Yuletide as a season to shake our fist at the world's commercialism; for you and I have within us the *real Spirit of Christmas*—Christ Himself. Thus we can, yea, we must—make the most of Christmas.

May God bless you, and may this be the most Christ-filled Christmas you have ever known!

The story of little Freddy explains the real meaning of Christmas. And with this we close:

(on next page)

THE STORY OF LITTLE FREDDY

Little Freddy gazed wistfully
Into his father's eyes
Who, (knowing little boys)
Found questions no surprise!

"Dad, why are people so different at Christmas?
So happy about the day...
If that's the way they're 'sposed to act
Why aren't they *always* that way?"

On the surface, the question seemed simple enough
And Dad answered with a smile
"People act that way—because..." then He paused
And said, "Son, let's talk for a while."

And He said with his arms about the boy
"To see why we act that way
We have to begin by asking ourselves
'What happened on Christmas day?'"

"That's easy," the little boy replied,
"That's when Jesus came!"
"Right," said Dad, "And He brought life to all
Who call upon His name.

"At Christmas the world seems attracted
To doing things God's way
Because they remember, (just like you said)
Christ came on Christmas Day.

"Tis more blessed to give than to receive,"
They quote the master's voice,
And they sing carols that Christ is born
And truly they rejoice.

"But then the season passes; and another year begins
And they no longer *feel* this way because of all their sins.
And only in those within whose hearts Jesus really lives
Can His Spirit magnify the joy He really gives.

"Maybe someday, Freddy, you'll come face to face with God,
And looking back behind you at the road that you have trod;
You'll find that something's missing, something deep within
And that's because, by nature, every man is born in sin.

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“And, Freddy, a sinner needs a Savior
And you’ll find it’s really true;
That this Jesus Christ of Nazareth
Came to earth to die for you

“So you’ll tell Him you’re a sinner,
And you’ll ask Him where to start.
And He’ll answer, ‘Freddy, ask me into
The manger of your heart’.

“And Freddy, then *you’ll* realize,
Much to your surprise,
In a Christian’s heart, that Christmas Spirit,
Never, never dies.”

“Daddy,” little Freddy asked;
(His tears were a joy to see)
“I’ve got a little-bitty manger.
You think He’d come to live with me?”

And the light in his eyes reminded his Dad
Of a star that shone one day;
That came to rest directly above
The manger where Jesus lay.

It’s a living light in the eyes of all
Who have taken Christ in their heart;
An outward sign of an inner joy
That only Christ can impart

Maybe *you’ve* never received Him.
You can give Him your heart today,
And the light in your eyes will tell the world
“At last I have found God’s way!”

Then each of us; and *all* of us
Can pause ‘neath life’s Christmas tree
And show the world a portrait
Of what Christmas was meant to be!

Then, together, let’s send a greeting
To our special little friend
Merry Christmas, Freddy,
Now, Christmas will never end!

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