

7 Ways to Have the Best Christmas Ever

It's Christmas time again. Seems to come every year about this time. The most wonderful time of the year.

*There'll be parties for hosting
Marshmallows for toasting
And caroling out in the snow.
There'll be scary ghost stories
And tales of the glories
Of Christmases long, long ago.
It's the most wonderful time of the year ...*

(That could almost be a song. Wait a minute—I think it is.)

But if you're like many of us, Christmas will be over before you took time to enjoy it. You might even get past Christmas and realize how fast it passed, and so you set some New Year's resolutions to slow down and—maybe—enjoy Christmas more next year.

What if you could do that this year? Why not? Sounds like a good goal to me. Enjoy the celebration of Christmas. The birth of our Savior. Relish the time with family. Savor every moment.

Here are seven suggestions to make this the best Christmas ever:

1. Set a limit on expenditures. Something happens when Christmas becomes more about the value of the gifts than the value of the season. More, more, more only produces energy in a direction that can never really be sustained (see Eccl. 5:10). Start with a budget. Be realistic. Stop comparing. One problem for many of us is that we are trying to compete with everyone else. Obviously, if you have more money you can spend

more money (and less-less).

But make it your goal to invest more in people this year than in things you can buy. And don't feel obligated or pressured to buy gifts you can't afford for people. It will only be a temporary satisfaction and produce a lot of guilt in the new year when you see those credit card bills start arriving in the mail. (And usually the guilt starts as soon as the cashier hands you the receipt or you push the purchase button online.)

2. Set boundaries in relationships. This is especially true for younger couples and families, but really for most of us. You can feel pressured by extended family and friends to be a dozen different places. Remember, you aren't responsible for pleasing everyone—in fact—you can't. It's impossible. (Some have a harder time with that than others.) Don't let everyone else determine your Christmas schedule.

You may have to have some difficult but direct conversations with relatives or friends. Again, be realistic. You can't be everywhere. There are some places you can't (or shouldn't) avoid, but, as much as possible, control your schedule rather than having it controlled by others.

3. Plan and prioritize your time. This is similar, but also includes how we spend our own time at Christmas. There are usually more demands for our time than time for our demands. Just as you did in creating a money budget, create a time budget. Set aside some time for you to celebrate Christmas as an immediate family—or in a way where you best celebrate. Then build around that time. It's OK to say no. (Do you need to read that sentence again?)

If you don't, you'll run out of time before you feel you ever really celebrated. It's hard, but again, you're trying to actually celebrate Christmas—the birth of baby Jesus. That's hard to do when you have lost all control of your time.

4. Lower your expectations. I mean the ones that you have on

others and on yourself. Sometimes we set very unrealistic expectations on what others will buy or how they will respond to what we buy. We look for the “perfect” gift—to give or receive—and our enjoyment of Christmas is based on that search—rather than the real joy of the season. We also set unrealistic expectations on relationships.

We watch too many Hallmark Christmas movies where everything works out in the end to the perfect holiday celebration, and when it doesn't happen at our house quite like that we get disappointed. Remember, we aren't characters in a movie. We are characters in real life. Real life is almost never perfect. Learn to enjoy your celebration with all the quirkiness that makes your family unique from every other family. (Because every family is quirky in some way—in real life.)

5. Practice health disciplines. Sometimes in the name of “celebrating,” we overdo it only to have guilt about it later. Don't overeat or overindulge. You will occasionally—it's part of the season—but be reasonable. Keep exercising. Sample rather than eat full portions. You'll feel better and have less regrets after the holidays have ended.

6. Serve others. Find and establish a Christmas tradition of service. Whether it's serving at a food kitchen, ringing the bell for the Salvation Army or just picking up trash along the side of the road, you'll better appreciate Christmas when you serve. The real meaning of Christmas is based around serving others. The baby born at Christmas came to be a servant. The best way to celebrate His birth is to give back, expecting nothing in return. You'll be the bigger recipient when you do.

7. Remember the reason for the season. Yes, I saved the best and most important for last. On purpose. It's also the one we push to last if we aren't careful, and the ultimate purpose of this post, so I wanted it to be the last impression on your mind. Jesus—the reason for the season. It's simple—even

cliche, but it's true and it's powerful—if you do it genuinely. In the midst of the madness, rediscover the miracle of Christmas. A Savior—who is Christ the Lord—has been born to you.

Establish a tradition that helps you best identify with the true meaning of Christmas. You could take time to explore a character of the Christmas story you've not considered previously. Research elements of the setting and culture. Read the major passages in Matthew and Luke repeatedly through the season. Listen to only Christmas music. Attend special Christmas services. Whatever works for you. Be intentional to practice celebrating the real joy of Christmas.

Not all of these will apply to everyone, but my guess is if there are a couple here you need to work on—to better celebrate Christmas—you already knew it. As we begin the rush of the Christmas season, pause right now, take a few deep breaths and let's make this the best Christmas ever.

It's the most wonderful time of the year.

Ron Edmondson *is the senior pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky. For the original article, visit .*