

How Scrooge Can Save Your Christmas and Perhaps Your Life

You've probably heard his name taken in vain on occasion: Ebenezer Scrooge.

"He's such a Scrooge that he refused to donate to our company's help fund."

You might have even likened yourself to him on occasion: "I don't know what it is, but I can't seem to get into the Christmas spirit this year. I feel like such a Scrooge."

And, of course, you've probably seen him as the lead character in one of the five zillion adaptations of Charles Dickens' 1843 Christmas classic, *A Christmas Carol*.

But have you ever thought of Ebenezer Scrooge as an inspiration or as a teacher of life change? Have you ever considered him as not what he once was—a "mean or miserly person," as the American Heritage dictionary describes a "scrooge"—but as what he became: a wonderful prototype for a "once-was-lost-but-now-am-found" vision to find redemption?

This Christmas, it might be helpful for us to do so. If you think about it, there's a little bit of Scrooge in all of us—or at least the Bible says so. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Who among us hasn't, at times, been selfish or turned inward because we didn't want to be bothered? Who among us hasn't, at times, ignored the poor? Who among us hasn't become a bit smug about all we do and a bit condescending about how little those Bob Cratchits around us do?

I know I have my "Scrooge streaks." But in writing *52 Little*

Lessons From A Christmas Carol, I came to believe that Scrooge is a triumphant character who, even if he has to come kicking and screaming to do so, ultimately softens his heart and allows the spirits to change him.

Isn't that what God wants of us all? "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me. For I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). In essence, isn't that what Scrooge does?

Parallels With God's Word

Now Dickens' spirits weren't created to be literal depictions of the Holy Spirit, and when he humbles himself in the end and allows the spirits to make him a new man, there's no mention of God. But the parallels between the fiction of Dickens and the truth of God's Word are obvious.

"My study of Dickens has convinced me that he was a Christian and that he wrote unapologetically as a Christian," writes Gary Colledge in *God and Charles Dickens*. "Dickens' Christian faith and Christian worldview undergirded all that he wrote."

His convictions were strong enough that, in a speech at a children's hospital, he called Christ "the universal embodiment of all mercy and compassion, Him who once was a child Himself, and a poor one." Shortly before his death, he wrote a book for his children called *The Life of Our Lord* in which he challenged them to follow Christ.

When you start peeling away the layers of Dickens' beloved Christmas story, you find numerous themes and lessons that can help you become more of what God wants you to be. Granted, much of what Ebenezer Scrooge teaches us is the kind of me-first living that we're called to abhor; in other words, how not to live.

But throughout the Bible, we learn from the mistakes that people have made (David's wandering eye, for example) and from the triumphant love people have displayed (the Good Samaritan, for example). Here, then, are five lessons we can learn from Scrooge this Christmas:

Lessons on Love

Dickens did not write *A Christmas Carol* simply to entertain us as readers, even if he succeeded grandly in doing so. No, beyond entertaining us, Dickens wanted to make us uncomfortable because it's only after we get a touch uneasy with ourselves that we open ourselves to change.

He wanted us, as individual readers, to squirm a bit when we contrast our lives with a higher standard. "I have always striven in my writings, to express veneration for the life and lessons of my Savior," Dickens says. One of those lessons is to love others as God loved us—no small challenge.

"Everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself," writes author Leo Tolstoy.

Dickens wants us, as individuals, to confront our own ghosts. He wants us to feel the chill of regret, if necessary, and, like Scrooge, to make changes in how we live our lives.

Joy Thieves

Scrooge does more than rain on his nephew Fred and employee Bob Cratchit's parades. He sends a hurricane of ill will to remind them that he will not allow his business to be co-opted by this season-of-good-cheer blather.

But neither Fred nor Cratchit allows Scrooge's dark perspective to dim his own optimism. The two well-wishers don't lower their standards to his.

Take Fred. "A merry Christmas, uncle!" he greets Scrooge upon entering the man's place of business. "God save you!"

“Bah, humbug!” says Scrooge.

The narrator tells us Fred is “in a glow.” His eyes sparkle. He’s so full of peace and goodwill toward men that such feelings gush out of him with all the energy of a high mountain waterfall. It irks the stuffing out of Scrooge, who attempts to convince his nephew that only “fools” believe in all this Christmas spirit stuff.

Fred defends such spirit with gusto, with reason and with pride, but never lets that become more important than the person who really matters to him in this scenario: his uncle. He refuses to take personally Scrooge’s harsh retorts, even after the older man says, “If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.”

Fred responds by inviting Scrooge for dinner with his wife and friends, which shifts Scrooge’s anti-Christmas stance to an anti-love-in-general stance.

We live in a world that has the potential to suck the joy right out of us. Like Scrooge, it can be a world that mocks us, demeans us, gently tugs at us to brace an anti-Christ cynicism. But we would do well to, like Fred, stay steadfast in our passion to “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

Chains That Shackle

Before the three spirits of Christmas arrive, former business partner Jacob Marley visits Scrooge. He is clad in chains made of “cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel.” In other words, chains made of a life devoted to work and money, the minutiae of business, obsessions that choked out any thought about what really matters: relationships.

The ghost is contrite, as if it has learned more in death than in life. The counting house, his business, was everything to Marley, and now, the ghost realizes, it meant nothing. It was fool's gold, chains that enslaved Marley then, even if he didn't realize it at the time. They were chains that enslave him now, though he's helpless to free himself from them. Instead, he has become an "it"—a ghost—destined to "wander the world" and to warn Scrooge and those like him to wake up before it is too late.

What chains in our own lives are shackling us? The first step to any sort of life redirection is awareness, realizing who we are and how we might need to alter our course.

Circumstances beyond our control, of course, influence our lives. It would be insensitive to not acknowledge as much regarding, say, someone who's lost a loved one or had a spouse betray them or had been in an accident. That said, many people who wallow in discontent do so because of self-inflicted pain. In other words, they create their own chains.

Like Marley and Scrooge, they've built their lives on foundations too fragile to hold them: work, money, fame, achievement—you name it. Perhaps they're wrestling with addictions they won't admit they have, or they're wallowing in bitterness, unable to let go of a past hurt. The common denominator is they've made choices—in the words of Marley's ghost, by their "own free will"—that leave them shackled in discontentment.

The Love of Money Exacts a Price

On Scrooge's reunion tour with the past, a young woman named Belle suggests Ebenezer's love for her has waned. By now, Scrooge is a young man, making his way in the world of finance.

"Another idol," she tells him, "has displaced me."

When she suggests his idol is now wealth, he defends his pursuit of it with a passion she probably wished had been reserved for her. “You are changed,” she says, breaking off their relationship.

Decades later, the passion is gone, but the greed has grown. He clings to every pound as if it is the air he breathes.

As a money lender, his accumulation of wealth is how Scrooge controls people; to have a man owe you is to have that man in your power.

To Scrooge, it means everything—as it did to his partner, Jacob Marley. Materialism shackles us to self. It diverts our attention from the things that matter most: our faith, our families and our fundamental responsibility to help those less fortunate.

It promises much but delivers little—not that this should strike us as anything new. “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare and into many foolish and harmful lusts, which drown men in ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

The Decision to Change

Whether it’s the big decision to follow Christ as our Savior or less grand, day-to-day decisions to live more Christlike lives, change needs to be a hallmark of our lives. God washes us in enough grace to cover our sins from the east to the west. But He forces no one to choose His ways. Instead, He lets us decide.

With a little help from his spirit friends, Scrooge ultimately chooses to change, to choose generosity over selfishness, to choose people and relationships over money and materialism and to choose joy over bitterness.

I recently had lunch with a friend who has chosen otherwise. I

don't say this derisively—and, frankly, he would probably heartily agree, but in many ways, he is a modern-day Scrooge. He is nearly 80 years old. He is bitter about his body breaking down. He is bitter about not being accorded the respect he believes he deserves by certain people. He is bitter about relationships that have not worked out but feels no responsibility to try and repair.

Finally, I realized the loving thing was not to let him sink deeper in this quicksand of pity. As the spirits did for Scrooge, the loving thing was to help him see himself for who he was: a man who'd done some great things for our country, for our community and for me, but was now dragging around the chains of regret like Jacob Marley. But he is not a man without hope.

"You're choosing to be miserable," I said. "You talk about all the things that haven't worked out in your life instead of reveling in those that have. You've made a difference on this earth. And you can continue to. But you've given up. God hasn't given up on you."

Subconsciously, perhaps, I was repeating what Marley's ghost told Scrooge: He still had hope.

Conversely, I think of a young man in our church who lost his marriage to an addiction, then his home, then his job. But here's what he didn't lose: hope in the One who can heal.

The young man owned his mistakes, dug deep into God's grace, and at a recent writers' workshop I led, he got up in front of nearly 50 people and read one of the most courageous reflections on life I've ever heard. Just one of many ways I've seen him emerge as an example, like Scrooge, of breaking the chains.

To see the joy of Scrooge on Christmas morning is to be reminded of what God desires of us all: a life of renewal, gratitude and hope. God gives us the key to set ourselves

free. This Christmas and beyond, why wouldn't we want to open that gift with glee?

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Pastor Rick Warren reveals the powerful truth of what the season of Christmas really is at .