

The Essence of Christmas

One of my earliest memories of Christmas is a fond recollection of taking toys to some poor children. My family was living in Missouri at the time, and I must have been about 5 years old. Since my father pastored a small church, we weren't exactly well-to-do ourselves. But my brother and sister and I each selected one of the toys we had received for Christmas, and we took them over to the other family's home. Though I don't remember many details of that visit, I'll never forget the look of gratitude on those children's faces.

Not long after that, my folks moved, and we lost touch with the other family. But the joy of giving at Christmas to a family less fortunate than us has stayed with me more than five decades later. And that happy memory has continued to influence my life.

Christmas giving, contrary to some naysayers, did not begin with the Druids. It originated in the heart of God. The heavenly Father so loved the world that He gave His Son in the form of a baby on that first Christmas. So giving is the essence of Christmas.

Unfortunately, many American consumers go on a shopping frenzy at Christmastime, falling victim to unrestrained buying for all the wrong reasons. Taking advantage of such rampant materialism, each year merchants start the Christmas buying season a little earlier. Christmas sales are such a boon for merchants that it's said their favorite Christmas carol is "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Yet despite the way the Christmas spirit is exploited by Madison Avenue, generous giving is a biblical response for people whose lives are overflowing with God's grace. Jack Hayford, pastor of Church on the Way in San Fernando Valley, Calif., shed some light on the subject in a book titled *The*

Key to Everything (Creation House).

Hayford's premise is that the best things in life come from giving. He says you give only when you learn to forgive; you forgive only when you realize how much you've been forgiven; and you're only forgiven because God gave. So the key to everything is giving.

"When God opens the door to a promise such as this, you'll always find some critic ready to slam it closed," Hayford writes. "Or you'll hear someone express the promise in such a way that it confuses and cheapens the beauty of its simplicity. But let's not miss out on the life-changing key of giving—it involves more than our money. Giving is a mindset."

Hayford then shows how to give the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reasons:

- *Give up.* Surrender your self-righteousness.
- *Forgive.* Release perceived or real injustices.
- *Give over.* Let God see that justice is done.
- *Give in.* Let God's greater wisdom direct you.
- *Give wisely.* Acknowledge the reciprocal laws of the Lord.

How does this relate to you and me this Christmas season? Most of us will be in a more "giving" spirit than we usually are, so wise giving requires us to examine the motivations of our hearts. Giving that's done out of selfish motives or a sense of obligation dishonors the Lord and diverts His blessing. But, if we give for the right reasons and understand those reasons, I believe God will bless us in ways we don't normally allow Him to.

I agree with Hayford's premise that giving is a mindset, an attitude. We give because we have decided it is right. This is what I believe Paul meant when he wrote, "So let each one of us give as he purposes in his heart, no grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor. 9:7, NKJV)

In this special season of giving, I encourage you to think of the less fortunate. As in past years, I suggest earmarking a “tithe” of what you spend on Christmas as a birthday present to Jesus. In view of God’s precious Gift to us, Christmas is a wonderful season for bearing other people’s burdens and brightening their lives with generous giving.

Jesus said that when we give to those in need—the least of His bretheren—we are actually giving to Him (see Matt. 25:31-46). He described many simple acts in which we have an opportunity to demonstrate our love for Him: feeding the hungry, caring for the homeless and visiting those who are sick or in prison.

This Christmas, whether it’s donating money to a relief agency or doing volunteer work at a rescue mission, let’s give of ourselves freely and generously. Because giving, as Jack Hayford says so well, is the key to everything.

The entire staff of Charisma Media joins my family and myself in wishing every reader of Charisma’s print, book publishing and Internet properties a blessed Christmas season and a prosperous New Year.

Steve Strang *is the founder and publisher of Charisma. Follow him on Twitter @sstrang or Facebook at stephenestrang.*