

Don't Treat Him that Way!

I am sure you have heard the story of the “Grinch Who Stole Christmas.” You might think that things like that can only happen in a Dr. Seuss book. But that is no longer true because we live in a crazy, Dr. Seuss kind of world. One Christmas Eve just a few years ago, a Grinch in South Florida tried to steal Christmas from Ron and Helen Meijer. Well, he didn't exactly steal Christmas, but it was pretty close to that because he stole baby Jesus from the nativity scene on their front lawn. That's right, he took off with their plastic doll in their make-believe manger and left a rather odd ransom note behind. The thing is this particular Grinch didn't demand money. Rather, the note simply read: “If you ever want to hear from Jesus again, put this on your car Christmas Eve and park out front.” Paper clipped to this ransom note was a bumper sticker showing the outline of a fish with little feet and the word “Darwin” printed inside the outline. It was referring to Charles Darwin—and the bumper sticker design was the now familiar symbol of evolutionists. Mr. Meijer was not at all intimidated and simply reported: “We did not, of course, put the anti-Christ message on our car.” Mrs. Meijer was equally unimpressed and added, “They can steal all the plastic dolls they want to, but they can't steal what's in my heart.” As it turns out, this evolutionary Grinch apparently thought better of the whole thing and, by Christmas morning, the plastic doll was returned to the manger during the darkness of the early morning hour. Despite this mild disruption to their Christmas Eve, Mrs. Meijer indicated that she felt compelled to look beyond the manger scene to the redemption provided by the Risen Savior. In the end, she concluded that it would be best to simply forgive this rude Darwinist and offer him God's love on the morning that marks her Savior's birthday—showing that she acknowledged Jesus, not only as the “reason for the Season,” but the basis for her dealings with others as well.¹ She did not just sit there passively bemoaning this Grinch's ill-mannered act. Rather, Mrs. Meijer could look beyond the manger, and in so doing realized something that Martin Niemoller expressed when he wrote: “The Gospel is not defense, but rather attack, and it is up to the world to decide its position! The Gospel is glad tidings; and we will not allow the gladness it gives to be taken from us!”²

So now-a-days, Christians can't even leave a plastic baby in a manger without running the risk that someone might come along like the Grinch who robbed Mr. & Mrs. Meijer's nativity scene. But there is even a greater risk than that and it does not involve a mere plastic replica of the baby Jesus. Rather, it is the dangerous condition that exists when a Christian fails to look beyond the manger scene. In other words, we don't want to limit our perspective at Christmas time to merely the nativity scene. If

you do, there is a real danger of losing sight of the big picture and fail to recognize Jesus for who He truly is. There is a warning that we should take to heart this time of year, and it can't be repeated too many times: "Don't leave Jesus as a Baby in a Manger —don't leave Jesus that way!"

Yes, that baby in a manger is to be revered as very precious. He is to be adored—yes. But, Jesus demands more than mere adoration. He demands that you acknowledge Him as the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings³—as the one and only begotten Son of God.⁴ Let me give you an example. Thomas Jefferson was a brilliant man. He was adept in not only English, but was well acquainted with the French, Greek and Latin languages as well. And I believe that he admired God's Word. In fact, he produced his own personal version of the New Testament in which he pasted together the comparison version of the Gospels in parallel columns—one in English, one in French, one in Latin and another in Greek. And when he read what he assembled, Jefferson treasured Jesus' moral teachings. But, as far as Christmas was concerned, Jefferson rejected any concept of the Virgin Birth and refused to believe that Jesus was divine.⁵ Yes, he adored Jesus, not as the Son of God, but merely as a great philosopher who was only a man—nothing more. Now there are a lot of Christians who are shocked when they hear that. Unfortunately, those same people are not so unlike Thomas Jefferson. They adore Jesus, but fail to recognize Him for who He is—because if they truly acknowledged Him as God's Son, they'd pay a bit more attention to His commandments.

Even top religious leaders can fall prey to this shortcoming. Take Aaron, the brother of Moses as an example. Aaron made a mistake similar to Jefferson's—He failed to understand who God really is. In Exodus 32, we find the story of the golden calf. While Moses was away on the mountain, the Hebrews demanded that Aaron make them an image in order that they could worship. So Aaron took their gold jewelry and melted it down and molded a golden calf idol. And the people gathered around and sang out: "Israel, this is our god, who led us out of Egypt!" Exodus 32:4 (TEV) The problem was that for Aaron this gold calf was supposed to be the actual image of God. In a manner of speaking, Aaron made the same mistake Jefferson did: He respected God, but misunderstood His Marvelous Greatness.⁶ Aaron tried to mold God into the shape that he wanted Him to be. But, God molds us—we can't mold Him. As it turned out, Aaron corrected his mistake. It is doubtful if Jefferson ever did.

Now having covered that first point, let me move on to the second one. It goes like this: Don't leave Jesus as a baby in a Manger —don't leave Jesus that way (sound familiar?). Little babies are to be cuddled—yes. But, Jesus demands more. Little new-born babies don't get up and walk around. When people only cuddle the baby Jesus and walk around a bit with Him in their arms, they are the ones directing the path. They walk about where they want, oblivious to the baby's desire. But, that's not

what Jesus wants. He doesn't want people walking Him around (not that Jesus didn't like to walk). Jesus did a lot of walking around during His early ministry. But, He expected His disciples back then, and you now, to follow Him—not the other way around. Isn't that what the Apostle Peter tells us when he writes: "For to this very thing were you called, because Christ also suffered on your behalf, leaving behind for you a model to imitate, in order that by close application you might follow in His footsteps . . . who himself carried up to the Cross our sins in His body and offered Himself there as on an altar, doing this in order that we, having died with respect to our sins, might live with respect to righteousness, by means of whose bleeding stripes you were healed, for you were as sheep that are going astray and are wandering about, but now have been turned back to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." 1 Peter 2:21-25 (WuestNT) Certainly Peter was right, for Jesus Himself declared: "And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:27 (NIV)

Now point number three is this: Don't leave Jesus as a Baby in a Manger—don't leave Him that way! (I told you—it can't be repeated too much.) At Christmas time, we give gifts to each other—partly to acknowledge that Christmas is a time of generosity . . . a time of giving of ourselves to each other. This spirit of gift-giving during Christmas may well have originated with the Wise Men who came from the east to lay their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before His manger. And that was certainly an appropriate thing for them to do—three earthly kings acknowledging their submission to the King of Kings. Mary and Joseph—and even Jesus Himself as He lie there in that manger—they were appreciative of this gesture on the part of the Wise Men and the giving of their material gifts. But, Jesus did not come to stay in a manger and be the recipient of ***material*** gifts. Jesus wants a gift—that's for sure—but, it the ***gift of your heart***. But, that's where the real problem arises. God the Father is Holy and can only accept Holy Gifts—and our unclean hearts are anything but holy. So, how could they ever be made clean and acceptable to Him? So the Father made provision for this. He sent His Son, not to lie there in that wooden manger to receive earthly gifts, but to hang on a wooden cross—and in so doing to make our hearts clean (whiter than snow) through the washing of His blood.⁷ What a contrast: The gift of His Son laying warm in swaddling clothes in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem. Later, this same gift hung stripped of His clothes—battered and beaten, mocked and spat upon—naked as Jesus died on a hill called Calvary. And yet it is only through this gift of God's Son and His sacrifice that we are made whole. Our sin may have originated with Adam, whose one bite of an apple, ushered sin and death into the world. But it is an apple that we have all feasted upon one time or another—for we are all soiled by the stains of our sins. Yet, it doesn't matter, not one little bit, for those who surrender their hearts as a gift back to God. Paul explains this so well:¹⁵ "But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and

God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. ¹⁶ And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. ¹⁷ For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ." Romans 5:15-17 (NLT)

There is nothing more innocent than the scene of a little baby sleeping peacefully in a crib. But, there was only one little baby whose complete innocence followed Him to adulthood—Jesus Christ. And, it is only through Jesus and His sacrifice that we are made holy and presentable to God. That is the gift God gives to us—not one that is accepted by merely bowing before a manger in humbleness, but in kneeling before the Cross and asking for Christ's forgiveness.

Now my final point is this—just in case I didn't make it clear before: Don't leave Jesus as a Baby in a Manger—don't leave Him that way! The saddest thing of all is when people decide to come to church solely during Christmas each year and believe that it somehow satisfies their commitment to Christ. The problem is that it doesn't satisfy their commitment; rather it exposes their lack of commitment. It leaves Jesus in that manger. Not so much where thieves steal Him away like they did to that couple living down in South Florida, but where He fades from view in their lives and is just as effectively gone from their lives as if He had been stolen away. But the real thief—the real culprit, is their own neglect and rejection of Him. You see when you perpetually treat Jesus like He is a baby, you inadvertently, but surely, diminish your own faith. Jesus doesn't want a "baby faith." He wants to see your faith in Him grow to maturity. He wants you, in turn, to help others come to such faith and to grow in their faith as well. Christmas is a time of great gift-giving. Listen to the words of Paul as he tells of Christ's gifts to us: ¹¹ Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists [of which each of you happen to be], and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will **BE MATURE IN THE LORD**, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. ¹⁴ Then we will **NO LONGER BE IMMATURE LIKE CHILDREN**. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. ¹⁵ Instead, we will speak the truth in love, **GROWING IN EVERY WAY MORE AND MORE LIKE CHRIST**, who is the head of His body, the Church. Ephesians 4:11-15 (NLT)

Do you leave Jesus in a manger, or do you view the larger picture?—the one that leads from mere adoration of a man, to true worship of our God? It is an important question to consider, particularly on a morning during which we will partake of the Holy Communion—the Lord’s Supper. Think about the following words of the Christian writer, Lee Magness, who asks us what we see during Christmas time: “What [do] you picture? A birth or a death? A [manger] or a cross? The hill could be a sheep-studded hill near Bethlehem, or the hill called Golgotha. The cave could be a stable crudely cut into one of Bethlehem’s hills or a burial vault recently carved in a nearby cemetery. The garment could be swaddling clothes or a bloody, ragged loincloth. It is Jesus of course, but is he a newborn baby or a dying man? And it is Mary, but is she sitting at a cradle comforting her baby or is she crouching, crying, and in need of comfort? Is the man Joseph the carpenter or John, who will make her a home? Are the wooden beams a manger or a cross? Are they eyeing a cold, clear star or an eclipsed sun and a blood-red moon. The Herod could be “the Great,” who tried to kill the baby, or his son, who in a sense succeeded. The outcasts could be shepherds, kneeling on either side, or subversives, hanging on either side. The rich men could be magi who offer exorbitant gifts or Nicodemus and Joseph who offer only an empty tomb. There’s a mirror in the manger, a birth reflecting a death. So there is no better way to celebrate Christmas than to keep Communion”⁸—which is something that we will do in a few minutes.

But before will celebrate the Lord’s Supper, consider this paraphrase of something that A. W. Tozer once wrote: “Some churches have a teaching that you will find God only at their table [during the Lord’s Supper]—and that you leave God there when you leave. I am so glad that God has given us light [and corrected this mistaken notion]. We take the Presence of the [Lord’s Supper] with us—[we do not leave Him behind].”⁹ Leaving Christ behind is a dangerous thing to do—whether it’s simply forgetting him after Christmas is over, or leaving the Communion table behind as if nothing happened.

It reminds me of something I hope that I didn’t forget to tell you: Don’t leave Him behind! Whether it is at the manger or at the Cross—don’t treat Jesus that way!

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2017

¹ Jim L. Wilson, *Fresh Illustrations – Fresh Illustrations: Forgiveness & Reconciliation*, (Austin, Texas: WORDsearch, 2014), WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

² Elesha Hodge, comp., *Today's Best Illustrations – Volumes 1-4*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "GOSPEL".

³ Revelation 19:16 (HCSB) And He has a name written on His robe and on His thigh: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

⁴ John 3:16 (KJV) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

⁵ Charles B. Sanford. *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson*, University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville (1984), pp. 111-112.

⁶ J. I. Packer. *Knowing God*, Christianaudio (2011)—Chapter 22, Disc 8.

⁷ Hebrews 9:14 (HCSB) How much more will the blood of the Messiah, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to serve the living God? Revelation 22:14 (NIV) Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

⁸ Lee Magness, "A Mirror in the Manger," Christian Standard (Dec. 2012) <http://christianstandard.com/2012/12/a-mirror-in-the-manger>.

⁹ A. W. Tozer, *Mornings with Tozer*, Nov. 30—Compiled by Gerald B. Smith, Moody Publishers/Chicago (2008).